

Perry Rhodan

Peacelord to the Universe

Atlan and Arkon



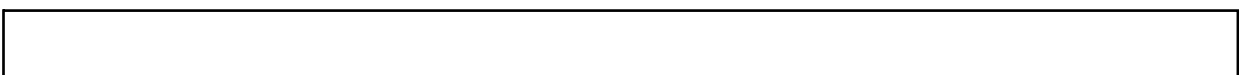
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Life Hunt

by Kurt Brand



This is the stirring story of—
LIFE HUNT



THE ACTION & ADVENTURE HAPPENS WITH

PERRY RHODAN—He lives for the propagation of peace

John Marshall—Chief of Rhodan's Mutant Corps; a telepath

Laury Marten—Mutant offspring (she can walk through walls) of Ralf Marten & Anne Sloane; age 23

Count Rodrigo de Berceo—Spanish nobleman 400-years-old but youthful in appearance

Capt. Rohun—A Springer

Arga Silm—A female Arkonide medical student

Man Regg—An Ara responsible for the production of the life-prolonging serum desperately needed by Perry Rhodan for 2 people near & dear to him

Gege Moge—An Ara physician

And 20 Other Characters—See Star Cast Editorial

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were
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Perry Rhodan

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1/ MISSION: LIFE SERUM

AT STAKE: the life of his wife Thora. And of his Arkonide friend, the venerable Khrest. The medical technology that had so far arrested the inexorable toll of physical decay now worked its miracle no longer. A new serum developed on Earth had held out hope but even that would soon prove inadequate.

On Wanderer, the Planet of Eternal Life, *It*, the keeper of the secret of the cell-shower, the life-renewal process, had refused to grant its boon to the Arkonides.

So now Perry Rhodan sat on the planet Hellgate, 12,348 light-years distant from his home world, contemplating a dark future and preparing to listen for the first time to the reports sent over the past few months from his agents on the planet Tolimon.

Meanwhile, a light cruiser was taking off for Earth with Atlan the Timeless aboard as prisoner.

Perry activated the hypercom message-storage unit. Reports of no special importance issued first; these he barely listened to. His gaze wandered out of the steel dome—the only place where human life could exist on this heat-bathed world—and out across the desert shimmering in the pallid yellow radiance of Star ZW-2536-K957.

Needing a secret base of operations as close to the planet Tolimon as possible, Rhodan had selected this sun's satellite Hellgate, a dead and useless world on the outermost perimeter of the Arkonide Empire. Tolimon itself was 81 light-years from Hellgate and orbited Revnur's Star, a G-type sun, as the 2nd of 6 planets.

A year had passed since Perry Rhodan's attention had first been drawn to Tolimon. He was always interested in the activities of the galaxy's race of medical geniuses, the Aras, and Tolimon was one of their worlds. More importantly, it was probably unique in the known universe: an entire planet dedicated to a single purpose: a galactic zoo.

Rhodan's reasoning followed the form of an equation: Galactic Doctors + Zoo = Research. His conclusion led him to send 2 of his Mutant Corps to Tolimon, where they had now been for 8 months. The mutants, telepath John Marshall and his feminine colleague Laury Marten, had been given the assignment of solving one certain problem. At irregular intervals over the subsequent months they had sent hycom reports to Hellgate and it was to these that Rhodan was now listening.

The recorder played back a message sent 3 weeks before. John Marshall's voice

was unmistakable. He spoke only 3 sentences and each one was disappointingly negative: he and Laury Marten had been unable to make any further progress on Tolimon.

There were no more messages after that. Perry switched off the machine. For him a long period of waiting was now beginning—but he had no time to wait.

Death by natural causes had seemed inevitable for Khrest and Thora—but then Rhodan's agents had brought back rumours concerning Tolimon, rumours of men living in the giant Ara zoo for centuries... never growing old.

Merely rumours?—or a ray of hope?

For Thora's sake, for Khrest's, Rhodan had to know.

Had the Aras, those medical masters of the Galaxy, developed a life-prolonging serum many times more effective than the Arkonide formula? If they had, if there actually was such a serum, Rhodan had to have it.

But for the time being all he could do was sit in purgatory on this hell world, waiting until John Marshall and Laury Marten at last approached their goal...

2/ A DANGEROUS OPERATION

ON THE Street of the Great Moh in the crowded centre of the city Trulan, the Springer named Ixt left his luxuriously furnished office and unobtrusively entered the large, modernly equipped salesroom.

A robust Ara was dickering with two clerks. “That isn’t any kind of a fair price—that’s robbery! I could buy gegerutavis for half that anywhere else. Look, friends, I’ll pay 180—agreed?”

“That’s fine—for one gegerutavi,” said Futgris, Ixt’s best clerk, nodding to the angry Ara in a friendly way.

“For the *pair!*” raged the Ara. “On Aralon they sell pairs for 40!”

Futgris grinned. “Of course! In fact, Aralon is where we get our gegerutavis, but don’t forget that Aralon is about 10,000 light-years from Tolimon. We do have to pay for shipping, you know.”

“*This is outrageous!*” stormed the Ara, hitting a cage with his fist for emphasis. The blow woke up one of the hiobargullos sleeping inside and set it to howling.

Startled, the Ara stepped back and stared at the cage from which the racket resounded. When the hiobargulloo finally quieted down, he stammered: “What is that—some kind of merchandising gimmick to lure the customers in so you can bilk them with your outrageous prices?”

Futgris answered coolly: “At 20 per, we’re selling hiobargullos very cheaply. For 35 you can have the pair. They drop litters 8 times a year, 6 offspring every time.”

But the Ara was not without a sense of humour. Suddenly he grinned broadly. “Fine! I’ll take a pair! But you might give me a guarantee that the little beasts will scream like that any time they’re scared.”

“Oh,” said Futgris reassuring him, “there’s nothing easier than that, sir. Don’t you know that in the natural state these cold-blooded animals are quiet only when they’re asleep? In fact, we keep them lightly drugged to insure their quietude, which is why they’re so still now. May I be so bold as to inquire what sort of research you wish to use the hiobargullos for?”

The Ara grinned even more broadly and rubbed his hands. “Research? Nothing of the kind! This is going to be a gift: tomorrow is my mother-in-law’s birthday! Instead of a pair of melodiously singing gegerutavis, I’m going to give her these little monsters! Could you drug them so they won’t start up until noon tomorrow

or so? Oh, this is going to be such fun!”

At that point Futgris had the impudence to ask, “My dear sir, aren’t you going a bit too far with your mother-in-law?”

Thus reminded, the Ara grew meek. He nodded seriously and said, depressed, “You could be right... Pack up a pair of gegetutavis for me, too, just in case!” Once more he hit the cage with his fist for emphasis and once more all hell broke loose from inside.

Visibly shaken by the second outburst, the man risked a look inside the cage. A furry blue creature the size of a man’s hand, distinguished by a loosely hanging dewlap under its chin, raised itself up on 3 fins in a corner and looked at him half-asleep through unnaturally clear eyes.

“What!” exclaimed the Ara in his booming voice, looking at Futgris distrustfully. “You mean to tell me that little ball of fur can make all that noise...?” But the Ara had forgotten himself and banged once more on the cage.

The little animal yet again shrieked its fright.

The man was half-deaf when he finally left Ixt’s animal shop with his menagerie.

All the clerks watched him go, and among them was Ixt, who had kept inconspicuously in the background. Nothing in his face betrayed the great concern that bothered him. Nothing about him betrayed the fact that he was in truth no Springer at all—that his appearance was only a skilfully crafted disguise. As he walked through the large display and sales area in returning to the luxury of his office, Ixt greeted his employees the same way he did every morning even though his thoughts were far away from mundane matters of business.

He considered the Ara who had bought a pair of hiobargulloos and a pair of gegetutavis—at government expense!

Ixt had read the Ara’s every thought: again and again the Ara had silently cursed his ‘crazy’ assignment. Because certain unclarities were present in the information Ixt had supplied regarding his birthplace and clan membership and none could be cleared up despite all checking through the records, the Ara had been detailed to keep a watch on the alleged Springer.

Ixt shut the office door behind him and muttered, “It seems to me somebody back on Earth goofed!”

Disguised as an animal dealer, John Marshall had learned by his telepathic examination of his Ara ‘shadow’ that he planned to bring the noisy hiobargulloos back to Ixt’s animal shop the next day. The Ara intended to make a recording of Ixt’s brainwaves, too, and without the Springer noticing.

Marshall nodded grimly and ceased his surveillance over the mind of the agent from the Ara secret service. Countermeasures had to be taken by next morning at the latest. First he had to get in touch with Rohun the Springer captain but it struck Marshall as too dangerous to try calling him over the city communications system.

When he left the shop 10 minutes later, Marshall went by Futgris and told him “I’ll be back sometime tomorrow afternoon. Take over for me and do a good job.”

“Yes sir!” answered the clerk, his eyes fairly glowing with joy. Never before had he had a boss like Ixt and it was a pleasure to work for him.

Hardly 10 steps farther down the street, John Marshall had already forgotten that he was owner of one of the most exclusive animal dealerships in Trulan. Only one problem occupied his mind: how was he going to slip unnoticed into his hideout in the slums?

* * * *

“Arga,” said Gege Moge angrily, pointing excitedly at the creature on the examination table, “don’t you see that once again we’re dealing with an anaphylactic shock? How often do I have to tell you that these violent reaction symptoms should appear under no circumstances during the preliminary tests? Now the entire preliminary test series has been rendered questionable! Have this binn sent over to Dissection and tell them I want to know why he’s allergic to his own blood serum. Why can’t the U-Lf54 Serum, which is taken from binns, be used on intelligence levels below C? And does it have the best results when used on levels B and G? Make it clear to the Dissection Department that I must have their findings tomorrow morning! Now get going and see that everything’s taken care of!”

With an angry look the Ara doctor watched the Arkonide girl, a medical student named Arga Silm, leave. Then he turned his attention to the dead binn, a late member of a species no one could accurately classify. A binn was a sort of halfway point between the plant and animal kingdoms. Carrying on respiration after the fashion of plants, it ate and drank in a distinctly animal manner. The binns were indeed neither plant nor animal but living things possessing intelligence, even if that particular attribute was rather limited and rated at Level C.

Gege Moge regarded with the eyes of a scientist the flat body with 5 members that served just as well for locomotion as for grasping and working. The binn was just over 3 feet long and weighed almost 90 pounds. Its head resembled a flower stalk and all its sense organs lay behind orifices which were now closed in death. Nothing could be seen of the mouth, the orientation sensor or even the ring of eyes. Formerly a warm-blooded creature, the binn lay stiff and cold on the examining table—dead from the serum its own body had produced.

“Poor fellow,” commented the Ara scientist, somewhat moved. “I’ve known you for more than 300 years and suddenly now you’re gone. It’s too bad, binn. I’ve always enjoyed working with you!”

He left the room and met the Arkonide student Arga Silm once more in the hall. He stopped her. “Go to the zoo and pick out 2 new binns. I need them for tomorrow morning.”

“But I’m not authorized to go into the zoo’s restricted area, Moge,” the student reminded him, looking expectantly at the Ara with her marvellously radiant eyes.

Already walking on, the Ara doctor told her “I’ll arrange for the Administration to give you permission but just to be sure, check with them before you go to the zoo and see if everything is alright.”

He isn’t lying! thought the Arkonide student. He only said what he really thought! At last I have something to report to John Marshall!

The Arkonide student was neither Arkonide nor a student. She was in reality Laury Marten, a disguised Terran agent who, like her partner John Marshall, could read other people’s minds. She walked thoughtfully to the antigrav lift, on her way to the wing of the building in which she had been living for months.

In her mind she was already formulating the text of the message she intended to ‘send’ to John Marshall.

Rohun the Springer captain could not betray John Marshall and Laury Marten. Too many of his own interests were involved in his dealings with Perry Rhodan’s agents to switch sides. Anyway, he was just not the type to be a traitor. Marshall had checked Rohun’s thoughts repeatedly, never finding any reason to distrust him.

And now he sat across from him. When John Marshall’s face suddenly showed he was no longer listening, the Springer had been trying to convince him his best course was abandoning the animal dealership and forgetting about the hideout in Trulan’s vast slum district. The Springer captain had seen that expression before.

John Marshall had become a telepathic receiving station!

Laury Marten, daughter of Rolf Marten and Anne Sloane, transmitted the news of her first success to him.

“Ixt,” said Rohun, leaning forward, “are you still listening to me?”

Marshall made a hand gesture that meant he was not. Rohun leaned back, having decided that patience was his only alternative.

Concentrating strongly, his eyes half-closed and his body motionless, Marshall sat rigid in his seat and telepathically instructed Laury Marten to determine at all costs whether or not there were in fact Terrans being held behind the zoo force-fields. *Try to find out whether they’re male or female, what countries they come from and when they were born, Laury. If you have to, use your disintegration power. But above all, don’t fail to make contact with them. According to all the reports from the other agents, there are people in the zoo; you must find them, Laury! Do I make myself clear?*

I understand perfectly, replied Laury Marten via telepathic impulse and with that the mental connection between the two Terrans was broken.

John Marshall looked like someone who had just been awakened from a light doze. He raised his head, opened his eyes and relaxed.

He took up the conversation with Rohun again where he had left off. “I don’t want to give the animal shop up, Rohun. As long as the Ara secret service is only investigating, the danger isn’t serious yet. I just want to know if I can depend on you in case of emergency. That’s why I came. What do you have to say?”

As usual, Marshall kept watch on the Springer captain's thoughts. The question had clearly angered Rohun.

"I don't have to say anything!" he growled. "Haven't my clan and I risked our necks already? My best men will be on their way to rescue you the minute you call for help! I'll even risk my ship if I must!"

Marshall suddenly jerked his head. Apprehension flashed momentarily in his eyes. Then the emotionless Springer expression returned to his face. "Rohun," he said, "the Ara Secret Service hasn't been sleeping! You're about to have a visit from the same agent who showed up in my store today! He's already in the ship and on the way to your cabin! Where can I hide in this room?"

Rohun, the old daredevil and ice-cold calculator, allowed a few inarticulate sounds to escape his lips. He already knew that Marshall had a sixth sense for danger but that Marshall's sense could be so explicit was something completely new to him.

"Get out through here!" exclaimed Rohun excitedly, standing by a small door.

"No—I want to stay in your cabin, Rohun. The Ara doesn't know I'm on board! Quick—find a place for me to hide!"

The situation was not at all to Rohun's liking. Like all Springers, he gave little credence to the supernatural and what Marshall was now doing struck him as nothing but supernatural. Even so, he gave in under John Marshall's forceful gaze—but only reluctantly.

"Don't make him suspicious," Marshall warned the Springer captain. "He won't ask too many questions!" With that, Marshall lay down on his stomach and crawled under Rohun's bunk, which concealed him perfectly.

Not long after, a clan member entered Rohun's cabin and asked the captain if he would permit one Huxul from the Alien Control Commission to come in. "What else can I do?" Rohun demanded, resigned.

Huxul, the Ara who had bought the pairs of gegerutavis and hiobargulloos in Ixt's shop, pushed his way into the cabin. "Are you Springer Captain Rohun? If so, then let me tell you I don't believe for one minute this nonsense about a defective audio-video connection! What's more, I'm telling you that—"

If Rohun was not precisely overjoyed by the visit from an officer in the Ara secret service, neither was he frightened. He had no mind to suffer fools gladly. Or at all, for that matter.

He interrupted the visitor sharply. "You can believe what you want but if it doesn't please you to talk to me in a civilized tone, I'm going to have you thrown overboard! Please sit down over there."

He offered Huxul the same seat which John Marshall had occupied just moments before.

Huxul was hardly seated when, with a malicious grin, he asked, "And where is he now, your visitor who was just sitting in this chair a few minutes ago?"

Rohun was not visibly disturbed by the question. "Huxul, I'm not an Ara! I'm a

Galactic Trader! My ship is a world in itself. On board my ship, no one but the captain asks questions, and I'm the captain. And it would certainly never occur to me to ask a question as stupid and offensive as the one you just asked!"

"I didn't mean it like that!" Huxul said hastily and with surprising friendliness. He had suddenly become another person entirely: polite, amiable and rather negligent about his duty. Rohun began to wonder.

He had no inkling of John Marshall's psychobeamer. The instrument was trained on the Ara at full intensity, persuading him to consider his mission fulfilled and to be nothing but a polite conversationalist.

The about-face had struck Rohun as positively uncanny, however, and John Marshall suddenly heard the Springer captain become energetic. "Huxul, would you please tell me why you've come here and what I'm being suspected of?"

At that moment Marshall lowered the intensity of the suggestive force beamed at the Ara. The secret agent still had no idea that he was telling the whole truth and that he wasn't supposed to. Rohun listened intently and with interest, then he sat back comfortably, smiled in amusement and commented: "Your little social call doesn't seem at all so harmless to me now, Huxul! Yes, I remember this Ixt. A clever fellow, expert in the field of zoology. By the way, zoology is also my hobby. That's why I remember this Ixt so well. If I'm not mistaken, he boarded my ship on the 3rd planet of Star J5457KL and we brought him directly to Tolimon. My dear Huxul, we galactic traders will do just about anything when there's a profit to be made and now and then our spacers will take on passengers. They pay for their voyage from one planet to another, of course. But Ixt was brought here a long time ago! What connection do I have with him now, Huxul?"

From his hiding place John Marshall forced the Ara agent to tell the truth again and Huxul was quite unaware that he had thus lost his effectiveness as a secret agent. He described the routine checking by Tolimon's huge positronic brain and how in reviewing Ixt's file it had discovered that some of the information was not consistent. "Since then, yesterday, I've had to bother myself with this laughably trivial matter," Huxul concluded, "when it would interest me far more to find out who stole the latest method for preserving Immunity Serum X-1076 in spite of the robot guards in Serum Works G-F 45. There's never been anything like this thievery, Rohun! And I had to give up that case so I could sniff after an animal dealer named Ixt! Of course, there's nothing you can tell me about this Ixt, right?"

Rohun answered with the most honest face he could muster. "Not a thing." Then he shook Huxul's hand goodbye. There are people one would rather see leaving than coming and Huxul was definitely in the former category. Rohun was much relieved to see him go.

Presently, Marshall and Rohun sat facing each other once more.

"I'd really like to buy the details of that preservation method," Marshall said.

Rohun shook his head. "My agents and I have had absolutely nothing to do with it. But I think I do know who 'obtained' it. Shall I get in touch with the other 'interested party' for you, Ixt? And how much are you willing to pay for the

data?”

“I won’t go higher than 15,000,” Marshall answered. “When will I know if the other party is willing to sell?”

“Tomorrow,” said Rohun.

“Fine,” agreed Marshall. “And tomorrow I’m also going to have need of an identical twin. For that I’m going to get another disguise. You still have 3 make-up artists in your service, so let them know their job is duplicating my face so well I can’t tell the difference myself.”

“Do you have a dangerous operation in mind?” asked Rohun with an unhappy suspicion the answer would be yes. He was gradually finding Ixt’s initiative distressing.

“Huxul is going to show up at my store tomorrow,” Marshall replied, “and he’ll try to return the hiobargulloo pair. At the same time, he’ll also try to make a recording of my brainwaves with his ‘cage’.”

Now Rohun leaped to his feet. The grey-haired man had suddenly become frightened and he shook his head in protest. “Why did you emphasize ‘cage’ like that, Ixt?”

“Because Huxul will come with a special cage that is indeed designed to muffle the hiobargulloos’ ghastly howling—but that’s not all: it will also contain a brainwave recorder...”

Rohun’s eyes flashed. “And then what will happen?”

John Marshall smiled. “After he goes back to his office, he’s going to tear his hair out trying to figure out why his device didn’t record my brainwaves. And because he doesn’t want another reprimand from his bosses he’ll turn in a faked recording.”

“Can you see into the future?” Rohun asked suspiciously. “Ixt, you’re starting to scare me. When I think of how friendly Huxul became all of a sudden... What did you do to him while you were hiding under my bunk?”

“What could I have done?” demanded Marshall, avoiding Rohun’s question. “Who will you send out tomorrow to take my place?”

“Otznam. He’s about your build. Ixt, you’re playing a dangerous game. Why don’t you tell me for once just what you want on Tolimon? Are you trying to free somebody from the Galactic Zoo? If that’s it, then let me warn you—the Aras have the zoo completely sealed off. Why don’t you explain your plans to me? Don’t you trust me and my agents, Ixt?”

“I just don’t want to put you into any danger, Rohun. It’s going to get dangerous enough as it is and the less you and your men know, the better for all of us.”

Half an hour later John Marshall left Springer captain Rohun’s cylindrical spaceship, satisfied with the results of his visit to the Galactic Trader. After taking all precautions, he reached his hideout in Trulan’s enormous slum some 2 hours later.

3/ TRICKING AN ARA

TOLIMON, THE 2nd planet removed from Revnur's Star, received so much light and heat from its mother sun that the average noon temperature was 110 in the shade—measured in Trulan, Tolimon's capital, and not in the area set aside by the Aras for an incredibly huge zoo.

In a vast desert of sand and gravel crossed only by a barren and dusty mountain range, the galactic doctors had constructed a prodigy for which there was no counterpart anywhere else in the galaxy.

A region almost the size of Texas had been reshaped into a zoo in which the specimens brought to it could live in environments artificially simulating their natural habitats. No effort had been spared to reduce the psychological effect of being held prisoner on the inhabitants.

Laury Marten, dark-haired, beautiful, 23-years-old and a daughter of Ralf Marten and Anne Sloane, entered the zoo for the first time by way of a road closed to the general public.

The Administration had already registered her arrival. After a quick check to confirm her identity as the Arkonide girl Arga Silm, she had been allowed to cross the energy barrier. A friendly Ara had put a car at her disposal, drawing her attention to its automatic direction-finder.

The Ara had never seen such a charming Arkonide. He found himself continually admiring her oval face and almond-shaped eyes. His attentions were not lost on Laury, who had been trained as an agent in Rhodan's Mutant Corps. One of the first things every agent learned was the importance of being aware of the impression one made on the people he or she encountered.

As a telepath, Laury could read the Aras' thoughts like the words in an open book. Lo Pirr, as he was called, was as open to her as any other Ara and she was satisfied with the impression she had made on him.

Perhaps she might often ran into him in the future. Laury Marten acted as charmingly as she could without being too obvious about it, hoping to make herself unforgettable to Lo Pirr.

As her car sped down the road, she could sense him watching her.

* * * *

Trulan, at once the capital of Tolimon and location of the largest spaceport on the planet, gave in its confusion the appearance of a city that had grown too quickly.

John Marshall had been living in the city disguised as a galactic trader for 8 months now, yet the impression still struck him every time he saw it, as though he were seeing Trulan for the first time once more.

Not only was Tolimon a melting pot of the galactic races, it was also a stepping stone on the way to uncharted reaches in the universe. The power of the Arkonide Imperium ended at Revnur's Star. Tolimon was the last world in this sector ruled by the positronic brain on Arkon.

John Marshall could understand why the Aras required a mammoth computer to keep even a superficial control over the masses of aliens congregating on Tolimon. Vast numbers of strangers landed on Tolimon, stayed for weeks or days, conducted business (legal or otherwise), concluded deals (legal or otherwise) and then vanished without a trace into the depths of the Milky Way.

Prankish chance had caught him in the gears of the infallible computer. There had apparently been a mistake somewhere in his falsified identification papers, no doubt thanks to some incompetent back on Earth. Marshall still saw no reason to be unduly concerned.

Even in the guise of a galactic trader, John Marshall looked like a man of 35. He felt no older and yet... He was in fact 94 years old.

The cell-renewal process of the planet Wanderer, the world of the Immortal Unknown, had accomplished this biological miracle. One treatment, which defied Earthly understanding, halted all cell degeneration completely for more than 6 decades. Marshall's age was only a set of numbers, quite unrelated to his actual physical condition. An Earth doctor examining his body with the primitive methods available to him would not have thought John's age even possible for someone so young-looking and healthy.

But were there not similar miracles on this world, Tolimon?

Eternal life, for example?

He thought about it as he left the beam transporter at the edge of the city and entered the slums.

The afternoon heat was almost a physical presence in the narrow streets and alleys. A stench permeated the air and the deeper John Marshall penetrated the slums the greater became the poverty and filth.

Then he turned and disappeared into a soup kitchen, making his way to the restroom. There were 3 exits to be found here—and Marshall was not the only one who took advantage of the fact to mislead any pursuit. An unkempt-looking Arkonide who had come in before him glanced nervously around, left through the second door and took off through an inner courtyard.

Marshall took the 3rd exit. He entered a dark and musty corridor, plunged into an antigravity lift and shot up 8 floors. There he made an about-face and let the 'down' tube drop him 3 levels.

The corridor here was deserted and Marshall went in the 3rd room on the left. An old man in rags—quite a contrast to the ultra-modern antigravitor!—was lying on a couch. He turned at Marshall's entrance and grinned trustingly at him. Marshall laid a banknote on a table and went into an adjoining room without saying anything. There he quickly changed his clothes: he put his good suit into an artfully constructed hiding-place, then donned some old clothing. A reflective-ray mirror showed him that he now looked like a Springer who was down on his luck.

He placed both hands against the empty space of wall between the door and the dresser. It swung back noiselessly, opening onto a narrow hall. Marshall went in.

An antigrav shaft just wide enough to accommodate a broad-shouldered Springer carried him down into the cellar. Confident of his goal even in the gloom the faint light of illumination globes failed to dispel, Marshall manoeuvred between the rubbish and ordure until he reached a staircase.

The 3 dozen steps led him in a winding path upwards. At the top step Marshall paused to listen for a moment. Then he pushed a rack of old clothes to one side and stepped through, finding himself in the aisle of a secondhand clothing shop.

Like a man unable to decide on a purchase, Marshall left the open-air business with pretended uncertainty. Sudf, the bearded shopowner, watched him go from a concealed hiding-place.

Marshall stepped out onto the street that, 3 doors deeper in the slums, ran past the entrance to that rather peculiar soup kitchen. A short distance later he stood before the crumbling front of the house in which he maintained his hideout. As he turned he glanced towards the end of the street. There he saw the needle-thin steel shaft that, rising 900 feet into the air and towering above all the roofs, served as a monument to the 'Great Moh'. The flaming Arkonide letters spelling out the word 'Moh' at the small, seamless base, testified to the structure's purpose.

Moh had been a medical genius who had lost his life some 3000 years before after experimenting on himself. He was honoured on Tolimon as on all other Ara worlds as an almost godlike being.

Marshall's quarters on the 15th floor looked as sordid as all the other apartments along the half-darkened ball. However, the door had been reinforced with thin Arkonide steel, making it somewhat more than just the entrance to a dimly lit room.

Ingenious security measures made any attempted forced entry impossible.

As John approached the door he met a barely perceptible impulse that prickled his skin. That was the signal that no one had tried to break in while he was out. He shut off the barrier and waited until the door swung back. Then he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

First Marshall opened the small skylight and then walked over to the sink where he let the hot water run. From there he went to the couch, lay down, crossed his hands behind his head and, pleased with himself, whistled the tune of some song then popular among the Springers.

At that moment the hypercom unit built into the ceiling began to function. The

recording attachment clicked on at the same time.

The hot water still streamed out of the faucet.

The skylight could not be closed.

The acoustic signal was necessary to activate the Hypercom. Its tiny loudspeaker was located in Marshall's watch, which he wore on his left arm.

John Marshall heard the hypercom emit a short signal. He had to take a deep breath.

The Chief was on the broiling planet Hellgate, waiting for news about the success of the mutants' work.

Marshall pondered briefly.

Just as one tiny device built into his watchcase was a loudspeaker, so another just as tiny mechanism was there too, functioning as a microphone. Marshall pressed a hardly noticeable knob on the casing, setting into motion both the coder and the sender.

John Marshall reported Laury Marten's first success in 8 sentences. He did not mention that the Ara secret service was on his tail.

Then he turned off the hot water and closed the skylight. The pressed knob on his watch was allowed to spring back to its original position. Thus were all the signs covered up that might have led to the discovery of the concealed Hypercom.

Marshall sat pensively on the edge of the couch. Under no circumstances did he dare risk this hideout. The room was his last connection with Perry Rhodan.

Just as he was about to leave his quarters, Marshall picked up an impulse from Laury Marten. He stood still, his hand still stretched to the door. Then his face seemed to light up for a moment as his lips formed the word, "Finally!"

* * * *

The direction-finder built into the land-going vehicle had helped Laury Marten find the binn enclosure quickly in spite of the great distance but the energy barrier around it still stood insurmountable before her.

She looked around for a frog, shuddering at the memory of the first time she had ever seen one of the 18-foot-long serpent-creatures.

It was still a matter of some effort for her to regard the frogs as intelligent beings and not just as disgustingly ugly animals. Many frogs spoke not only perfect Intercosmo but various Arkonide dialects as well; among themselves they communicated with the rich vocabulary of their mother tongue. The frogs were the Aras' most devoted friends—and the zoo inmates' most feared guards. No intelligent creature confined in the zoo had ever succeeded in escaping: the frogs caught the escapee every time.

Laury Marten walked slowly along the energy barrier. She could not understand why a frog had not yet appeared to inquire after her wishes. Then she climbed a slight rise, looked around and saw a serpent-creature in conversation with a young

Ara.

The Ara felt Laury Marten's gaze, turned and looked at her in surprise.

At the same time, the frog slid quickly over to her and politely asked what she wanted in a voice that sounded uncannily human. She requested that it open the energy barrier for a moment so that she could go in and search for 2 suitable bins.

The frog raised the first third of its seemingly muscle less snake-like body and regarded her with its staring eyes. Meanwhile, the Ara had joined the two.

The slender Ara with the wise face—economical in his every movement, restrained in his expression and the first Ara that Laury had ever met who spoke such perfect Arkonide—interested her and she saw to it that an interesting conversation was soon in progress.

He listened politely when she told him that she was studying zoology. When she told him that she was on Tolimon to prepare for her final examinations, he wished her luck on the tests. But when she spoke in calculated innocence of necrosis and expressed her doubt that a dead portion of a living body could be restored to life by 'Activators', the Ara suddenly showed more than just polite attention. How could the galactic physician suspect that this young woman, educated by the best Arkonide hypno-training methods, was an expert not only in Zoology but in medicine as well, at home with an astonishingly comprehensive theoretical knowledge?

The Ara introduced himself as Man Regg.

Laury Marten played her game further. She read his mind and saw that she could not take the initiative. Any important suggestions would have to come from Man Regg himself.

The Ara Man Regg was not just one of the hundred thousand physicians on this planet, Man Regg was the Ara, the man responsible for production of the life-prolonging serum!

Laury Marten wove her deception carefully. She said things just seconds after he had thought them but in her own words. When he had doubts about a matter, her doubts were a little greater. When he was absolutely positive about something, she spoke on the subject with somewhat less conviction.

And he fell for it! One of the greatest minds on Tolimon had proved inferior to the telepathic power of a young woman from Earth!

When he asked where and with whom she worked, Laury Marten read his mind and learned that he had the intention of having this amazingly brilliant woman transferred to his own research staff.

Laury Marten suddenly turned to face the Frog. The serpent creature's staring gaze had made her uncomfortable. One terrible thought burned in her brain—*Are frogs also telepathic?* She realized in horror that she did not know!

But then Man Regg asked her if she would like to finish her preparation for the examinations under his direction.

Laury Marten saw the manufacturing methods for the life-prolonging serum as good as in her hands. She was hard pressed to keep the triumph from showing in her eyes.

“Good, Arga Silm,” said Man Regg. “I’ll take care of everything else. I’m certain I’ll be seeing you tomorrow in X-p.”

After driving back to the zoo boundary with 2 small, tame binns in her car, she took a return flight to Trulan. En route she beamed a report of her success to John Marshall.

She was proud when she ‘heard’ John Marshall’s relieved thought: *Finally!*

4/ ASSIGNMENT: GEROMORPHISM

John Marshall followed Springer agent Otznam from a short distance behind through the crowds of people on the streets of Trulan. He silently admired Capt. Rohun and his clan—the make-up artist had done a truly magnificent job on Otznam. John Marshall had to continually repress the wish to look at his own face and see how he looked to others in his Springer disguise.

He was not the galactic trader, Ixt. That was Otznam, crossing the Street of the Great Moh, unaware that the real Ixt, clad as a bearded and vigorous space-traveller, was following close on his heels.

John Marshall read his thoughts: Otznam was cursing his mission just as heartily as Huxul had the day before upon leaving the shop with a pair each of gegetavis and hiobargulloos and returning to his office.

Otznam was worried. He had not been told just exactly what it was he was supposed to do in Ixt's shop. He noticed nothing when Marshall trained the psycho-beamer on him.

A few seconds later, the Springer agent had become familiar with the faces of all Ixt's employees and he knew their names and what their duties were. He was not surprised that he suddenly had a general idea of how Ixt's own office was laid out. Then he went into the shop by way of the main entrance, just as Ixt did every morning.

Greetings left and right, greetings from Futgris, and his own comment: "Is everything alright, Futgris?"

Meanwhile, Marshall had come into the store, shooing away an eagerly approaching clerk with the irritable: "I want to look around first! If I see anything I want, I'll let you know!"

John Marshall checked the thoughts of his overly eager salesclerk but he had not noticed anything familiar about the voice of what seemed to him a gruff and bearded space roamer. Not even Marshall's familiar way of walking had caused the clerk any second thoughts.

Reassured, Marshall turned his attention to Springer agent Otznam, having him tell Futgris: "If anything important comes up, I'll be in my office!"

"Very well, sir!" replied Futgris and started to walk over to the storeroom, where at that moment a new shipment of animals from the Planet Oka, was being unloaded.

He did not realize that his boss, disguised as a bearded space-traveller, was sending him to the storeroom by hypnotic compulsion. The same force was also instructing him not to look for the boss in his office under any circumstances.

10 minutes later, John Marshall left his business and lounged nearby on the street outside, Waiting for Huxul's arrival.

His patience was put to a long test. Again and again his mental probing for Huxul's thought radiation met with failure. It was about noon before Marshall caught sign of Huxul.

Huxul came angrily towards the animal shop.

Marshall went back inside the spacious display room of the store with all its confusion of animals and cages, and stood hidden behind a cage of charmingly cute, ape-like kikkis. As he fended off another all-too-eager salesclerk, the Ara came in with the special cage in his hand.

Futgris was responsible for exchanges of animals but first he had to be called in from the storeroom.

Futgris laughed when he recognized the man as the customer who was going to play a prank on his mother-in-law with the hiobargulloos but then his face suddenly lost all its expression. Marshall had given him an order, reinforced by the mechano-hypnotic effect of the psychobeamer, to have no one but the boss make a decision on this exchange.

Now Huxul grinned broadly as he murmured, "But of course!" Then he took the cage in both hands, holding it against his chest so that the side away from him slanted upwards.

Marshall searched Huxul's thoughts. The Ara still seethed in anger. He thought about the dressing-down his superiors had given him the day before upon his return from Rohun's ship. He had been accused of negligence and irrational conduct. No opportunity had been missed to impugn his abilities as an agent and he was even held responsible for the purchase of the expensive animals, although the idea had been that of the 2 superior officers and not Huxul's.

Then Futgris came out of the office with the ersatz Ixt and John Marshall activated the psychobeamer. The beamer was a miniaturized version of the well-known Arkonide device but it functioned only in concert with Marshall's telepathic power. Thus there was no chance that the mini-beamer would ever be recognized for what it was.

Huxul set the sound-absorbing cage of hiobargulloos down. Ixt refused to take the animals back, but did show interest in the cage itself. Huxul was the very model of friendliness and politeness and nodded in agreement while Ixt took a closer look at the cage. In so doing Ixt—or rather, the disguised Otznam—turned it 180.

Through Huxul, John Marshall knew where the switch for registering brainwaves was located. While the Ara agent begged Ixt to please take the animals back and refund the money—his mother-in-law had not given him any peace since early that morning and he regretted ever thinking of the practical joke

and he had no idea how he was ever going to calm the old lady down again—Otznam in Ixt's disguise had time to make a recording of Huxul's brainwave pattern.

When, at Marshall's order, he set the cage down once more, he also received the instruction to take the animals back. Futgris hurried with the cage into the storeroom and shortly returned with it, empty.

Huxul had his money refunded, thanked Ixt and Futgris in a friendly fashion and left the shop with undisguised haste.

Then the false Ixt returned to the office and Futgris went back into the storeroom. With that, John Marshall saw his purpose here as fulfilled; but Huxul required a more intensive treatment.

He followed him slowly, pushing through the crowds on the Street of the Great Moh, and gradually caught up with the Ara agent.

He watched thoughtfully as Huxul entered the mammoth building that was headquarters of the Ara Secret Service, carrying the cage as though it were the most fragile object in the world.

* * * *

Huxul waited until he got the brainwave recording and evaluation back from the laboratory. In the meantime he wanted to write his report but something seemed wrong with his mind. He couldn't think clearly and in fact it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember just what *had* happened in Ixt's animal shop barely an hour before.

Then the recording and evaluation came down the chute. The lightning bolt emblem in the lower left-hand corner was the sign that the recording had been processed by the positronic computer.

Huxul's mounting enthusiasm suddenly checked itself when he noticed the code number. "What's this?" he demanded. "Is Ixt already registered here—with an *Ara* serial number?"

In an instant he was active: he set up a connection with the division of the Positronic set aside for Ara serial numbers and submitted the number given for Ixt. The screen on his desk lit up almost immediately.

Some seconds passed before he realized he was reading his *own* file. 5 more seconds went by before he realized he no longer understood anything.

And then he remembered how both his superiors had threatened him the previous afternoon. That was enough to prompt a rash action.

Huxul wrote a report that in no way reflected what had actually happened. His only thought was to prevent the wrath of his bosses from falling upon him. His report stated that nothing was amiss about a Galactic Trader named Ixt who kept an animal shop on the Street of the Great Moh and that any minor inconsistencies in his file could probably be attributed to someone's error.

Huxul forgot that his fictitious report would inevitably be checked over by the positronic computer. The electronic Brain operated on the basis of sheer logic and his deception would, without question, come to light.

John Marshall knew it. Yet, standing before the building and keeping watch over Huxul's thoughts, he was not greatly disturbed. He would not be able to stop the inquiries against him but each day he won in delaying the inevitable gave him and Laury Marten all the more opportunity to attain their goal.

And on Hellgate, some 81-light-years away from Tolimon, Perry Rhodan waited in the protection of a steel dome for their success!

* * * *

While standing before the energy barrier enclosing the binn area at the zoo, Man Regg had referred to something called "X-p". That turned out to be a gigantic building labelled as such. And, from what Laury Marten knew of the Aras' style of architecture, she suspected that the complex extended 3 times farther into the ground than it did into the sky.

"X-p" was emblazoned on a sign above the main entrance.

X-p lay almost in the centre of the continental zoo, far from the sectors open to tourists and the curious. It stood in the middle of the desolately rolling, sun-scorched desert.

Looking as though it had been cast from a single mould, the 8-story building stretched for miles.

Laury found it difficult to decide what shape the building was. At first she thought of an enormous round-ended tube but when she stood before the light blue tinted facade, she was not quite so sure.

Her heart beat faster as she entered the security checkroom: a large lobby famished in choice luxury and subdued colours. It was pleasantly cool and, thanks to the sound-muffling carpet, quiet.

Because her non-Arkonide organic structure could be spotted at almost any moment, every check meant danger for Laury. Even though everything possible had been done on Earth to make her non-Arkonide origin less obvious, she had not forgotten that there was a vast difference between the technologies of the Arkonides and the Aras.

Like the Galactic Traders, the galactic physicians had descended from the Arkonide race but in the course of development over thousands of years both splinter peoples had gone their own ways. The fact alone that the worlds in Arkon's realm were supplied solely with Ara medicines showed how striking the direction of the Aras' separate development had become.

Numbering in the billions, the Aras embodied a knowledge of medicine the Arkonides could not hope to match. Only the sheer might of the mammoth Positronic on Arkon, which itself made every decision affecting the Empire, had

crushed every attempt by the Aras to take over and rule the Arkonide Imperium.

Thoughts such as these ran through Laury Marten's mind while she stood being examined by crystal lenses in the security room.

The clear blue light signifying she had passed the check suddenly blazed into life in front of her. In the same second she started forward and was not surprised when the large transparent portal silently swung open at her approach and allowed her to enter the interior of X-p.

A radiant dome vaulted above her. A dome in a tube-shaped building? Her step hesitated. Iridescent light glowing from orifices in the ceiling and reflected back from the smooth floor confused her. The knowledge imparted to her electrohypnotically did not extend far enough to help her in identifying or coping with the light reflections.

Then a sonorous voice asked her to approach the middle of the light circle and walk once around the periphery. Only later did she learn that the procedure was a method of disinfecting visitors.

Puzzled, Laury obeyed. She felt nothing as she advanced from one composite light ray to another but hardly had she ended her circuit when the same voice inquired as to what she wanted in X-p.

Softly, Laury answered that Man Regg had ordered her transferred to X-p. Then she gave her Arkonide name of Arga Silm and waited for instructions.

She had been in the building 5 minutes now and she had yet to see either an Ara or a robot.

On the dome wall to her right, a door rolled up in the fashion of a Venetian blind, revealing a circular opening. She then heard the sonorous voice for the last time, telling her to step through and entrust herself to the transport band.

Again Laury Marten felt the odd prickling tenseness she had experienced before when stepping through the outer doors.

She was startled to find herself in a closed room. She saw nothing of any kind of conveyor system. Then a faint trembling suddenly ran through the floor and the opening behind her closed without a sound.

She wondered if it were yet another check since X-p was, after all, the place where the galactic physicians' greatest secret was manufactured—the life-prolonging serum!

Laury Marten puzzled over her nervousness when the wall before her suddenly sprang apart. Man Regg, her acquaintance from the day before, stood waiting to greet her.

Pride shone in his eyes when he saw her confusion. "We Aras are making progress in other areas besides medicine. Technology, which our people have neglected for so long, is now experiencing a second golden age, Arga."

Then they sat down, facing one another, and once more Laury Marten played cat and mouse with Man Regg. She read his thoughts and formulated her answers accordingly.

She bluffed the brilliant scientist with his own knowledge. Yet it was possible for her only because she had been prepared for her mission in advance by hypno-training; she had been taught the greatest part of Arkon's medical science and had become especially expert in the areas of galactic zoology and serum medicine.

Distrust suddenly showed in Man Regg's eyes.

Laury Marten had been careless. She had verbalized his thoughts without changing them enough. Bad as that was, it was not the worst of it: what she had pronounced was one of X-p's most closely guarded secrets—an Arkonide could not possibly have known of it!

Yet, the girl mutant was lucky—what Perry Rhodan had constantly drilled into every one of his people was her salvation. She did not let the mistake she had made disturb her. She became at once ice cold, with no feeling whatsoever—the very prototype of a logical machine.

His distrust mounting, Man Regg reflected over the broad outlines of the process to which, to his horror, the Arkonide girl had so casually referred.

His clearly stated question, unmistakable in its meaning, still echoed in the room when Laury Marten was ready with her answer.

She smiled. She leaned forward. She played her charm to the hilt—and she sparkled with her knowledge. “The whole problem is only a single chain of logical conclusions, Man.” she began, and then explained her opinion.

Smiling all the more, she watched the effect of her words on Man Regg's face. Next to the distrust appeared amazement and admiration. Amazement and admiration finally won out, fortunately enough, and Man Regg, otherwise sober and practical, was so enthused over Laury Marten's fine-honed logic that he impulsively said: “I've been thinking, Arga—would you like to join my personal staff?”

Laury Marten answered yes, believing that the end of her mission was in sight.

* * * *

John Marshall had received Laury Marten's telepathic message while en route to pay a call on Springer captain Rohun. Her optimistic statement gave him a moral boost which lasted until he arrived at the spaceport. There he looked for Rohun's spaceship—in vain.

Rohun had taken off without telling him!

Still in his bearded disguise, John Marshall was immediately alarmed. Then he picked up another telepathic impulse from Laury Marten.

He saw no more of the hustle and bustle of the spaceport. He saw neither ships taking off nor landing. He paid no attention to what went on around him—he only listened to Laury Marten's report.

John Marshall became angry! Now he learned every detail of what had happened between Laury Marten and Man Regg, even to her careless answer and

her attempt to extract herself from the dilemma by juggling more than ever with the content of Man Regg's mind.

She was still a member of the staff working most closely with Man Regg but the Ara scientist had already grown suspicious of her.

From X-p, Man Regg had not only contacted the security department there but also the Secret Service in Trulan, requesting all available information concerning the Arkonide student Arga Silm. His most devastating argument against summarized itself in the comment: "Although she's no more than a student in Zoology, Arga Silm knows more than my best doctors!"

John Marshall's expression hardened and he remembered what he had thought about Laury Marten since the beginning: she still lacked the experience necessary not to overestimate her own capabilities. Nor had she developed the ability to see things far enough in advance. Intoxicated with her initial successes, she was too easily drawn into making mistakes.

"If somebody blundered somewhere in forging her file, all of Tolimon will be after our scalps!" he said to himself, feeling uncomfortable.

Then he cast his worries forcefully aside. The problem at hand was finding out why Rohun had taken off in his spaceship and where he had gone.

Marshall stepped onto the transport band leading to Sector G-88 of the spaceport, that place where just the day before Rohun's ship had been standing. He walked across the vast plaza, watching an Arkonide ship of the typically spherical design break through the cloud cover and silently touch down. Then he turned and went towards an antigravitor, which led to the elevated highway where he hoped to hail a transporter and return to the city.

Then, in the swarming mass of alien humanity surrounding the lift towers, he spotted Egmon, one of Rohun's agents on Tolimon.

The Springer looked more like an Arkonide. His white-blond hair was particularly outstanding but the trait that identified him as Egmon and always fascinated John Marshall was his ability to change the colour of his eyes at will, rather like a chameleon.

"Egmon," said John Marshall, walking past him.

The Springer agent heard his name but the bearded man who had pronounced it was a stranger to him.

Meanwhile, John went over to one of the many Information Robots standing by and gave it Rohun's ship number, asking it where the galactic trader had gone.

"No information available!" grated the machine's vox box.

Marshall had expected as much. Then he sensed someone standing behind him. Instantly he sent his thoughts searching into the other man's mind.

Egmon's thoughts were anything but peace loving. Rohun's agent regarded the bearded fellow as a police spy for the Aras—and just to be prepared, his hand clutched an impulse-beamer at fire-readiness in his pocket.

Turning around, Marshall whispered: "I wouldn't shoot if I were you, Egmon."

The Springer was suspicious but something about Marshall's voice seemed familiar to him. Even so, the mutant had to identify himself before Egmon would relax.

"It isn't your beard that makes you hard to recognize," said Egmon in surprise, "but those broad shoulders! By the stars, Ixt! I've been waiting for you for hours! Our clan-leader heard some bad news and took off. He's out somewhere halfway between Tolimon and Hellgate, waiting to see how things develop."

"How what things develop?" What could have happened now? Bad luck seemed to be crowding in from all sides.

"A man in Estgal's clan was arrested and brainwashed."

Marshall had never heard of any Springer patriarch named Estgal.

"All of Estgal's clan was involved in smuggling Ara pharmaceuticals. The Aras knew it but could never catch Estgal in the act or infiltrate his organization—if only Estgal had never gotten himself involved so directly! He could have lived to a ripe old age."

"Estgal is dead?" Marshall blurted. He had begun to feel an interest in this hitherto unknown Springer patriarch.

"3 or 4 hours ago he and 18 of his ships were annihilated in space by an Ara battlefleet. That's why Ara spies are crawling all over down here."

Marshall had known Egmon to be a reserved and taciturn agent for Rohun but now his verbosity was profuse as he gave his account. Only thanks to Rhodan's training was Marshall able to keep a grip on himself. "Please, Egmon—tell me only the important things? What was Estgal trying to get hold of?"

"Trying?" the large, white-blond agent whispered back. "He got it! With the help of a bribed Ara he managed to make off with the formula for preservation of Immunity Serum X1076! He took it right out of Serum Works G-F 45..."

That sounded familiar to Marshall. Then he remembered having read Huxul's mind when the spy had been puzzling over the formula and its disappearance.

"Then what?"

"Last night, Hduzz from Estgal's clan was arrested and brainwashed. The bribed Ara was arrested after that and given the same treatment. By that time it was morning and Estgal had been tipped off. He flew into space with his ships but the Ara battlefleet was waiting for him... Now do you understand, Ixt, why my master is 40 light-years away from here?"

Marshall allowed the question to go unanswered. "Do you have very close contacts with Estgal's agents, Egmon?"

"You'll have to talk to Otnam or Tulin about that," said the Springer, changing the colour of his eyes again.

Marshall quickly checked Egmon's thoughts to see if he were telling the truth but no lies were evident. He tersely asked: "I'd like to meet Tulin here tomorrow at this time. Can you tell him that, Egmon?"

"He could be here in an hour," said Egmon, his eyes turning green.

“Tomorrow!” said Marshall decisively. He nodded imperceptibly to Egmon and disappeared into the throngs of passers-by.

He took an antigravity lift up to the elevated roadway on the 4th level and caught an express to the city. His thoughts centred around the assignment Perry Rhodan had given him and Laury Marten. He sighed. The mission now seemed virtually, impossible to carry out.

* * * *

Man Regg shook his head for the 3rd time but he did not interrupt the agent from his security force while giving his report. He listened attentively with the patience of the reserved and dignified man he was.

Man Regg, the brilliant Ara physician, was not the only listener: 3 of his colleagues were sitting by but neither did they interrupt the speaker.

“You may leave now!” Man Regg told the security chief of X-p when he was done, dismissing him.

When he was alone with his colleagues, Man Regg asked: “Well?”

The same conclusion was repeated 3 times. “Flawless but...”

The 3 ‘buts’ meant Laury Marten.

By means of the hypercom, the Ara Secret Service had traced Arga Silm’s past even into the heart of Arkon’s interstellar empire.

Headquarters in Trulan had followed different lines of inquiry than the X-p security division but both had emerged with identical results.

Arga Silm was a 23-year-old Arkonide, female, from the planet Devin. She was a student of zoology and about to undergo her final examinations. Her professors spoke highly of her faculty for medicine.

Her entire file was flawless! Even the portrait of Arga Silm sent from Devin more or less looked like her; any differences could easily be attributed to the distortion and unclarity of a photograph transmitted by hypercom.

In spite of the double conclusion, Man Regg was still not satisfied. He made a suggestion and since he was chief he heard only agreement.

Gelte, the Ara zoologist, would test Arga Silm in the presence of his 2 colleagues, Kelise and Azza, while Man Regg followed the proceedings over closed-circuit video from the next room.

Man Regg disappeared into the adjacent chamber and Arga. Silm-Laury Marten was called to the chief’s office. The 3 Ara scientists believed they had an unsuspecting Arkonide girl before them and Laury did nothing to dispel their illusion. But she knew what was going on.

She entered with a friendly smile upon her lips and pretended to be astounded to see 3 strange Aras instead of Man Regg. She sat down and shortly found herself in the middle of a greuling examination.

She had need of all her energy and concentration not to lean toward the one

extreme of being an Arkonide girl prodigy or toward the other of being extraordinarily stupid.

Just as the knowledge of Arkon medicine imparted to her by hypno-training would have been insufficient had she not been able to draw on Man Regg's own mind, so here too she had to pick the brains of her 3 interrogators to avoid the traps and pitfalls they set for her. Even though she was a telepath and able to read minds, it was still a Herculean effort for her to keep tabs, on 3 different minds at once, concentrate on the answer itself and still remain the self-confident and calm Arkonide girl.

Suddenly a stronger impulse from the next room disturbed her. At the same time, an important question was asked.

Laury Marten escaped by saying she had not understood the question, an excuse usable on any planet. In that way she won the time to learn just who was in the next room concentrating so strongly on her and to formulate her answer to the question.

She suddenly grew playful. The 3 interrogators began to see her as a medical phenomena—and she began using Man Regg's thoughts in answering their questions. Only she put forth as an incorrect observation something which Man Regg knew to be correct and offered arguments which represented the weakest links in Man Regg's chain of research.

"Yes," said Azza in some surprise, "but does this mean that Arkon is so far along in the field of genetic research that these genetic irritations, unknown to all doctors until now, are henceforth to be regarded as generally advantageous?"

Laury Marten answered pleasantly. "You'll find in my records the notation that I was Moguld's assistant for a year. I'm sure that Moguld has a good reputation on Tolimon."

"We were not aware that Moguld had concerned himself with hereditary biology, Arga Silm!"

She remained pleasant. "Is the Arkonide Imperium aware of everything already discovered on the Ara worlds?"

"That's not an argument!" hissed Azza angrily.

"Is Moguld's theory an argument, then, when he claims that the secret of eternal life lies hidden in the chromosomes?"

"Nonsense!" growled Azza.

"Is it still nonsense when one takes the number of chromosomes common to a species and artificially increases their number, forcing the extra chromosomes to cease their indirect cell division?"

Laury Marten smiled while seething internally. Meanwhile, Kelise, Azza and Gelte were lumps of living fear they saw their greatest secret had been uncovered. They had thought the problem through to this point and Laury Marten prayed to the gods that one of the Ara scientists would carry it the rest of the way in his mind and thus reveal to her whatever entangled and complicated method was used to manufacture the life-prolonging serum. If one did... Then her job was done.

Perry Rhodan would be freed from the unbearable torment of watching his beloved wife Thora age perceptibly by the day and his friend Khrest sink into senility.

She read new thoughts: fragments, but enough to tell her that the 3 Aras sitting across from her wanted to achieve endless prolongation of life without the serum. And they were apparently not far from that goal!

And just as she began her attempt to hypnotically influence the Aras into revealing more to her, Man Regg came out of the next room to congratulate her!

She regretted his entrance for the Aras had almost given her the secrets she needed to know.

While she mustered a blush in response to Man Regg's glowing words of praise, she innerly saluted the Solar Defence back on Terra. Its men had performed a miracle in so accurately forging the information in her file as Arga Silm. Yet, even as Laury Marten praised the staff in Terrania—and as John Marshall cursed it for its carelessness—neither knew that without the help of several Galactic Traders, the Solar Defence would never have been able to produce such exact data.

Her claim of having worked with Moguld could be confirmed. In fact, there really was a girl Arkonide zoology student named Arga Silm, although the genuine one had been on a Springer ship for over 8 months, studying xenozoology on location on an extended field trip. However, that was known only to Rhodan and the Springer captain concerned.

In spite of Azza's distrust, Laury still had one more master performance of telepathic skill to bring off. She carried on a fluent, professional and precise technical discussion with the Aras, giving them the impression of a body of scientific knowledge in her mind so vast in scope it took their breath away.

Had John Marshall taken part in the conversation, he would have found some way to end it before Laury's overconfidence gave the whole game away.

"I suggest," said Man Regg, ending the conference, "that Arga Silm go to work in the Geromorphism section—or do you have differing opinions?"

Young intelligence was set to work in the Geromorphism section studying the effects of atrophy on facial skin and those working there often suffered from advanced symptoms of old age even despite their own youth and the use of life-prolonging serums.

None of the 3 Ara physicians had any objection to the director's suggestion—not even Azza.

5/ HALL OF DREAMS, HELL OF DREAMS

The hypercom in Ixt's luxuriously furnished office was nothing out of the ordinary. As a major dealer in rare animals, Ixt depended upon the tools of his trade and this was one of them; he had often in the last 4 months arranged via hypercom to buy scarce breeds even while the Springer ship with the creatures on board was still thousands of light-years away in space, often landing on Tolimon only weeks later.

This morning, John Marshall let his hypercom warm up with Futgris sitting across from him, waiting in case his expertise should be required.

Thanks to Tulin, one of Rohun's agents, Marshall had learned the day before that the Springer, Bet, was on the way to Tolimon with a shipload of extremely unusual animals. Marshall was now calling the *BET-765* over the hypercom. He wanted to throw all his energy into the deal: his meeting the previous day with the redheaded daredevil Tulin had inspired him. An innocent observation on Tulin's part had suddenly become a powerful incentive: the closer you work with the Aras, the more they'll trust you...

And Marshall knew from his 8-month experience on Tolimon that the quickest way to a galactic physician's heart was to show him an exotic species of animal he had never heard of before.

The *BET-765* replied. Bet's face, which fit well. The body of a young and strongly built Springer, appeared on the screen.

Bet grinned faintly when he heard the reason the animal dealer Ixt of Trulan had called him. "All I had to do," Bet said, "was land on a planet where everything stank to high heaven and load up the animals I could catch. I'll wager that not one of these beasts is known in the Arkonide realm. I was wanting to deliver the whole cargo to the Aras but if you're buying and the offer is good, I'm selling! Wait a minute—I'll show you my ship's zoo!"

His image disappeared from the screen, replaced by one of the animals in the cargo hold. Though by now quite accustomed to the most hideous and improbable looking creatures, thanks to his missions on many different worlds, John Marshall still had to hold his breath.

Bet had on board his ship a collection of the most horrible animals imaginable! Along with many others impossible to classify, there could be seen lizards, giant bats and amphibians.

Ixt looked questioningly at Futgris. Futgris offered no advice but the enthusiasm blazing in his eyes was plain to see. That was enough for John Marshall.

The dickering required half an hour before the deal was closed. Futgris had to whistle when his chief confirmed the final buying price once more—1.3 million!

The hypercom remained in operation. Even with the *BET-765* still 8529 light-years out from the Ara planet Tolimon, John Marshall and Futgris catalogued from the office the stock of animals on board Bet's cylindrical ship.

When the last animal had been recorded on film, Marshall told his best salesclerk to have 30 copies of the catalogue ready by noon.

And 2 hours later, 30 copies lay atop John Marshall's desk. Futgris received a bonus for his quick work and after that the Ara was ready to give everything he had in service to his boss if he had to. He congratulated himself again and again for having signed on with the then newly founded firm 8 months before.

* * * *

“Central Purchasing Administration!”

It was there that John Marshall now found himself. After meeting with 18 different commissions with the robot carrying 30 catalogues in tow, he was at last sitting across from Kolex, an elderly Ara bent with age—but nonetheless still a sly old phoks. His eyes clung to John Marshall while the mutant spoke but his fingers never stopped moving across a control panel.

After reading Kolex' thoughts, John Marshall knew what the canny official was doing with the switchboard: he was alerting everyone in the enormous complex who would be interested in acquiring previously unknown animals.

The parley between Marshall and Kolex was watched and listened to from over 20 different places. Only the catalogue remained to be seen and Ixt's robot held the copies in its steel arms, standing unmoving behind its master.

Again Kolex pressed a button and established a new connection. John Marshall learned telepathically who the new listener was and had to summon up all his strength to keep his triumph from showing: bio-physician Man Regg was now on the line!

“A catalogue!” demanded John Marshall from his robot.

He laid it directly before the field projector's crystal lens and at the same time the room darkened automatically. The image of the first animal, blown up to some 15 feet, was projected against the wall.

John Marshall remained patient, interested only in Kolex' thoughts. He read them while sitting back in his seat, eyes half-closed.

Kolex' thoughts revealed what he outwardly tried to hide. He had to struggle to prevent his enthusiasm from breaking out. Again and again he had to stifle the urge to spring up and give voice to his astonishment. He had been head of the

Purchasing Administration for over 800 years and in all those centuries he had never seen anything so hideous, so novel, so unusual as this menagerie.

The projection of the catalogue lasted an entire hour. Then the light of the sun was allowed to stream into the room again.

Perry Rhodan's mutant named his price, demanding 2.1 million! He was not at all embarrassed for demanding so much—he had been reading Kalex's mind and the old Ara was willing to pay at least that much!

Yet, instead of agreeing to Marshall's figure, Kalex chose to make a veiled threat: "But Ixt, you don't have the creatures here yet. According to what you say, the deal was made over hypercom. What's to prevent me, from finding out which Springer has this cargo on board and then deal with him myself? Letting him know amidst all the pleasantries, of course, that he would have some 'difficulties' if he did not close the deal with us..."

And Kalex's thoughts showed he intended to do that very thing.

Marshall smiled at him sympathetically through his perfect Springer disguise. "Please, Kalex!" he said, saying nothing more.

The impatience in Kalex's eyes grew noticeably. He hastily ordered a connection with the Hypercom Monitoring Service to find out which Springer ship an animal dealer named Ixt had contacted that morning. The connection made, an Ara at the other end promised to deliver the requested information in a minute.

The minute never came!

John Marshall's sympathetic smile grew broader. "Kalex, I'm *a Springer!*" he emphasized. "My hypercom is a Springer invention!"

His meaning was clear: the Hypercom Monitoring Service would never find out to whom he had spoken or what about.

A moment later, a meek-sounding voice from the Monitoring Service reported that the requested data was unavailable.

Kalex still had the composure to inquire: "Are hypercoms of this sort permitted on Tolimon, Ixt?"

John Marshall brought his best argument into play. "Am I here for a trial or what? Kalex, we Galactic Traders do business with everyone in the Imperium and there are others besides Aras who would be interested in my offer. Shall we consider our discussion at an end?"

The noon heat wave in Trulan measured 110° in the shade when the contract for 2 million was signed between Ixt, the galactic animal dealer, and the Ara Purchasing Administration.

And when John Marshall left Kalex, they had become the best of friends!

* * * *

The *BT-765* landed at the Trulan spaceport 2 days later. The arrival of the

cylinder-ship caused a sensation; such a large number of transport cages was not to be seen everyday.

Curious sightseers were plentiful enough in Trulan but a large crowd of people could be seen fleeing to all sides when the great hatch to Cargo Hold F was opened. Anyone born with a human nose held it, desperately trying to squelch the nausea induced by the incredible stench emitting from the open hold.

Marshall quickly installed his tiny breathing device and took a few deep breaths, then rubbed the sweat from his brow.

The odour was spreading like a viscous fog, constantly reinforced by new emissions from Cargo Hold F.

Ara zoologists, even though somewhat used to this sort of thing, fell unconscious in droves while some managed to escape along with the curiosity seekers. Only after an hour had passed, the stench-wave growing nearer to the gigantic terminal building all the time could the unloading of the animals be begun.

Kolex stood next to Marshall at the broad ramp and watched while a 30-foot polyp-monster was seized with tractor beams and placed behind the energy barrier of a transport cage.

“An oxygen breather!” exclaimed Kolex excitedly. “And what a smell! This one feature alone is something entirely new to us! One question: why do these creatures give off such an unbearable odour?”

John Marshall played his role of a business-minded galactic trader to the hilt. “If I had known they smelled like this, you would have had to pay a lot more than 2 million!”

The remark reminded Kolex that he had tried to pressure the animal dealer. Inspired by the feeling he ought to make up for it, he commented: “Our deal is known all over town, Ixt! Just yesterday I was visited by the Secret Service! Have you ever done anything on any world under Ara jurisdiction that conflicts with our laws? The officer inquired in great detail as to how our deal had come about! Trust me, Ixt, and I’ll try to help you! I have no small influence even with the Secret Service!”

John Marshall immediately went cold and checked Kolex’ thoughts; but the chief of the Purchasing Administration was saying just what he thought.

“Secret Service? Me?” said John in simulated surprise. “No, I’ve never been aware of running up against any laws. Did the officer say why he had come?”

“Yes, Ixt! Your personal identification isn’t consistent! There’s supposedly a galactic trader named Ixt living on Xylon in the Hogur System! Ixt, when I look at the wonderful treasure you’ve sold us, it does my heart good! Even if you were under suspicion for something, I would try to help you! Trust me, Springer!”

John Marshall wondered why the ground didn’t open up beneath his feet and engulf him. He couldn’t let Kolex’ remark go unanswered but just at that moment Laury Marten’s telepathic call came to him.

“Later!” he telepathed back to her. “Not now! 10 minutes from now, fine, but

not now, Laury!”

“But I found them! I found the people the Springers’ rumours said were in the zoo! Marshall, I must tell you right now that...”

Even swearwords could be transmitted telepathically and John Marshall ignored the fact that she was a lady. He was the leader of their commando team and he forbade her to bother him now with her telepathic message.

He took a deep breath. Then he looked at Kalex. “What were you saying, Kalex?” Then he laughed. “Thanks,” he went on. “I won’t forget that you wanted to help me but I don’t think it will be necessary. I would really like to know, though, why the Secret Service is so interested in me. I am Ixt and this Ixt on Xylon must be an impostor!”

“...In any event, you’ve sold us the most sensational catch of the last millennium,” Kalex said—and yet, it sounded as though meant to hint at something, have a double meaning, and be a warning, all at the same time!

Marshall checked over the Ara’s thoughts but found nothing more than what Kalex had told him. What motive had prompted Kalex’ clear warning? Did he act on the basis of his feelings?

* * * *

Behind a low hill in the continental zoo, Laury Marten suddenly saw a structure that reminded her of a Swedish peasant’s hut.

She had been on the way to the enclosure where the bombos were kept, those ape-like creatures with 2 heads. The bombos not only possessed short arms that resembled those of men but could also speak, write and read.

The direction-finder built into her land-going vehicle had been set to the bombos’ enclosure when by merest chance she had seen the Swedish peasant’s hut. A quarter of a mile away, enclosed by poplar trees and roofed with straw, it had struck her like a greeting from Terra!

Braking sharply, she brought the vehicle to a stop, climbed out and ran towards the energy-barrier, keeping a lookout for Froghs.

No froghs were visible as far as she could see. When she ran into the energy-barrier and was thrown back half a step, she had made her decision.

She was not just a telepath, she was also a human disintegrator. She could dissolve molecular bonds by the sheer force of her will. Thanks to her ability she could step through solid walls and even energy screens with no danger at all.

Laury Marten stretched her hand to the invisible energy barrier, concentrated and focused her will like the burning point of a lens on the barrier. She felt the barrier resist, so she strengthened her concentration. Then she took another step and smiled in relief. The solid, undamaged energy barrier was now behind her.

This section of the zoo lay over 120 miles from the area open to the public but one could still see everywhere just how much effort the Aras had expended in

simulating the original environments of the inmates.

The Swedish cottage towards which Laury ran could very well have been standing in Sweden. There was nothing alien about it. It was a Swedish cottage reproduced to the most minute detail. But when she actually stood before the house, she was startled. Just how old was this cottage, she wondered in surprise, shaking her head upon seeing the crude, wrought iron door handle and the hinges, nearly an inch thick.

When she took a look inside, she saw an open fire and a copper kettle, black with soot, hanging on a tripod.

Middle Ages, she thought in amazement and searched for the farm cottage's inhabitants; even with her telepathic powers, however, she found no one in the immediate vicinity.

She turned quickly around to look for any of the ever-suspicious Froghs but had to smile in relief when she saw that none of the serpent-creatures were around. She dashed around the house; now she had the building and the rustling trees to cover her from the rear.

Her steps grew slower. The narrow, plainly used footpath led upwards along a slope.

She had expected a new surprise when she reached the top but what she actually saw stopped her dead in her tracks.

Uncomprehending, she stared at a structure erected in Aztec style!

Aztecs?

Historical dates ran through her mind. Aztecs: Indian inhabitants of Central America, subjugated by Cortez between 1519 and 1521, their culture destroyed and their gruesome and bloody religion wiped out at about the same time.

With that her knowledge of Aztecs was exhausted but the building before her eyes—A Palace—reminded her of pictures she had seen of Aztec architecture.

17th Century?

Was the Swedish farmhouse from that period too?

Then she gave a start—a man had stepped out of the large doorway at the side of the Aztec palace!

Laury Marten felt her heart pound.

A man, quite unaware of her presence, left his palace and walked towards the left, in the direction of a flat structure that looked like an enclosure for a fountain.

But *how* he walked! Like a king! And like a king's, too, were his figure and bearing!

He was tall and broad-shouldered. His hair was dark and shone like silk.

Now he lay down at the flat enclosure.

The girl mutant slowly started to move. The man still knew nothing of her presence. Then she stumbled. Two stones struck each other and the silence carried the echoes even farther than usual.

The man raised his head and saw her, then got to his feet. His right hand went

to the hilt of his short sword while his left pulled off his broad-rimmed hat. He took half a step backwards and made a deep, graceful bow. He straightened up and—and Laury Marten and Duke Rodrigo de Berceo stood facing each other!

She stared at him like a little girl.

He was of mixed blood—mixed to advantage. Aztec and Spanish blood had combined in Duke Rodrigo to produce an extraordinary example of manly beauty.

How fiery were his eyes! How commanding was his jaw!

His nose was just a little too big but even that was enough to give his masculine face the touch of a fearless crusader, of a proud man!

And now he was smiling at her. Laury saw his nostrils tremble and felt his gaze, which held only the highest respect.

“*Kartaga tardaga?* Who are you?” she asked in the language of the Aras, as hesitant as a shy schoolgirl.

“Duke Rodrigo de Berceo, son of the Aztec Princess Uxatelxin and the Spanish Duke Juan de Berceo. I was born in Mexico in the Year of Our Lord 1652 and at the age of 22 abducted to Tolimon. Would it please you to hear more, milady?”

Born in 1652!

Back on Earth, it was May 2040!

And Duke Rodrigo de Berceo looked no older than 30!

To live 400 years and still look 30?

Until Laury Marten thought to use her telepathic ability to search Duke Rodrigo’s mind, previous minutes of hastily formed questions and answers had ticked by. And her astonishment grew.

Her eyes were continually drawn to his form and the more she looked at him the more familiar she became with his costume: tight-top boots reaching to his hips, skin-tight pants of velvet, a short and armless jacket closed by a wide belt, the soft, turned-up blouse collar protruding elegantly from the jacket’s neck, the billowing sleeves of the snow-white blouse ending in delicate points, the gleaming scabbard and the short sword swinging back and forth on its silver chain and the plumed broad-brimmed hat waving in the wind.

The heavy golden chain about his neck did not seem ostentatious: like the Aztec sun-god amulet it carried, it simply belonged to the costume of the 17th Century.

It seemed like a crime to Laury Marten to search through Duke Rodrigo’s thoughts. Even though she remembered that it was her duty and part of her mission, she did it only reluctantly. That fact alone was the first sign of something happening to her which even she was not consciously aware of.

And then, a fraction of a second after first looking into his mind, she realized he had been telling the truth—this ‘30’-year-old really was born in Mexico in 1652!

I’ve got to tell Marshall about this! was her only thought and while Duke Rodrigo admired her from a short distance away she made contact with John Marshall in Trulan. In the next moment she received his harsh reply and stinging

rebuke and then John Marshall broke the contact!

Rodrigo, however, interpreted Laury Marten's visible anguish as having resulted from his openly expressed admiration for her.

He, the man from the 17th Century, suddenly kneeled before her, grasped her hand and pressed his lips against it in a polite kiss. He begged forgiveness for the fire in his heart.

At any other time, Laury Marten, child of the 21st Century, might only have smiled in sympathy at his manner of speaking—but now she saw only the homage of a man who was concerned that he might have gone too far in his admiration for a beautiful young woman.

Laury Marten did not take her hand away.

* * * *

John Marshall met with Egmon and Tulin, two of Rohun's Agents, in the Hall of Dreams as he had at length been able to arrange with Tulin.

There was no meeting-place less obvious than this obscure pleasure palace, which was forbidden for all Aras. The Hall of Dreams was devoted entirely to poisoned dreams—drugs. Whatever Hell had invented to ruin mankind could be had here for a price. Any wish at all could be realized in the Hall of Dreams.

John Marshall closed the ray-screen that shielded his booth in invisibility. Despite the multitude of private booths in the Hall of Dreams, a newcomer would only see, as he had when first coming in, a vast domed interior, yawning in its emptiness.

He stretched out on the bare floor. The herfnis drug lay next to him but he had no intention of rubbing it between his fingers and then surrendering his soul to the orgy of colours the poison offered.

His telepathic power broke through the ray-screen and grasped for the thoughts of Egmon and Tulin—instead, he gripped into the mind of someone at the main door who had come here for a mere diversion, taking the first step off the precipice as it were.

Overcome with loathing, Marshall regretted ever having had the idea of meeting in the Hall of Dreams. Then he caught the thoughts of Egmon and Tulin, who neither suffered from addiction nor had the desire to play games with dangerous drugs.

The daredevilish Tulin whispered to Egmon: "How are we ever going to find him?"

John Marshall then brought his psychobeamer to bear, leading them through the maze of invisible ray cabinets and stopped them in front of his own booth.

He opened the ray-screen for a few moments and Egmon and Tulin grinned in astonishment when they saw him lying on the bare floor. They sat down on the floor beside him. There was no other place to sit.

Both Springers threw coins in the comer. Tulin muttered a curse. “That’s good money down the hole. ‘Pearl Dreams’ they’re nothing compared to my nightmares!”

Marshall had no idea what Pearl Dreams were but Tulin’s nightmares interested him.

“My nightmares are the latest Ara robots on duty in the serum works, Ixt!” he explained grimly. “Now we know why there isn’t any Estgal clan anymore! The Aras are always coming up with new deviltries to make our work harder for us—and now they’ve mixed watch-robots with the work-robots! You can’t tell them apart but the Watchers are there, never fear! Positronic watchdogs is what they are! Living alarm boxes! They work like the others but their job is to report the slightest little untoward incident in the final serum production stage, no matter how trivial! By all the gods, Ixt! Are you sure no one can overhear us here?”

“I’m quite sure, Tulin,” said Marshall reassuringly.

“I hope so,” said the taciturn Egmon and sank back again into gloomy brooding.

“So,” said Tulin, “the bribed Ara was frustrated by a Watcher when he took the preservation formula and...”

“But that wouldn’t have been in the final serum production stage!” John Marshall objected sharply.

The brawny Tulin scratched his red hair. “Then those positronic snoopers are everywhere, Ixt! Of course—they must be everywhere, and for the moment anyway that’s the end of our flourishing little business. What a shame!”

John Marshall could not bring himself to even smile at Tulin’s sorrow. He was not interested in whatever games the Springer agents had been playing with the Aras. The introduction of the watch robots meant the abortion of his mission!

Laury Marten might just as well break off her studies in the Galactic Zoo. When Springer agents, old hands at this sort of thing, openly admitted that their hands were tied, then at most further action would only mean he and Laury would be revealed as Terrans—even though the planet Earth had ceased to exist in the eyes of the Arkonide Imperium more than 50 years before!

Egmon, who had been musing, raised his head. “I’m getting 5000 shaks tonight!”

John Marshall raised his head, too, and stared at Egmon. What the white-blond Springer had just said gave the lie to all of Tulin’s remarks.

Dispensing with subtlety, Tulin threatened his fellow clan member: “Egmon, if you—”

“With this!” said Egmon and pulled a tuning fork out of his pocket. It was identical with the device known on Earth by the same name. Egmon delighted in the astonishment of the 2 men sitting across from him. “The Aras might be good at brewing their remedies but they ought to leave building robots to the experts. The Watchers have a flaw the Aras don’t know about yet.” His grin widened. “Or can you still buy an old-fashioned tuning fork anywhere in Trulan now?”

John Marshall admitted that he did not know what he was driving at.

Egmon winked at him. “Watch Robots are allergic to G sharp. I don’t know what goes on in their positronic brains when they hear it but it’s a fact that when a G sharp is sounded they break down without notifying Central of it. That’s how I’m getting my 5000 shaks tonight!”

Shak capsules were the only cure for Ferm’s Disease, a treacherous allergy caused by spaceship transitions into hyperspace. The sufferer usually died in a matter of months.

“You can really knock out robots with that thing?” demanded Tulin, still not trusting Egmon’s claim. Egmon stuck with his statements but before an argument could ensue Marshall remembered the reason they had gathered here.

“The second nightmare is of a different sort,” answered Tulin, glancing at John Marshall. “Ixt, we’ve set 18 agents to work on this. Egmon escaped being arrested by only a hair. I even had to keep Huxul’s wife busy for 2 hours while Huxul was having his ‘accident’. He’s in the hospital now, by the way. The Aras will have seen through our trick by this time but Huxul won’t be awake for at least 10 days!”

“Was he mugged?” asked John Marshall sharply, feeling uncomfortable. He knew Tulin but for some reason the 30-year-old Springer had never explained why he hated the entire Ara race. Because Tulin always used the most radical means he could against the galactic physicians, Marshall feared the worst.

“We didn’t beat him up,” Tulin growled, “we just inoculated him-with gerf!”

“What’s gerf?” demanded Marshall.

“The Ara Secret Service uses it too—whoever gets the stuff in his bloodstream sleeps for 10 days and during that time has to be artificially nourished. If not...”

“What’s the point of this clumsy action?” Marshall asked, considerably disgusted. Rohun’s agents had been behaving like stupid schoolboys and in the meantime the danger had increased.

Now the Ara Secret Service had to notice that something about him was not in order!

“Here...” and this time it was Egmon who laughed quietly and happily, offering Marshall a folder.

Wondering, Marshall took it. “What’s this?”

“The Aras’ proof that you are not the same Ixt who lives on Xylon in the Hogur System! Now who are you, really?”

“I’m curious about that myself,” said Tulin. “If I didn’t know” that Rhodan and the Earth have been destroyed, I would think that you were some creature from Earth and...”

“But fortunately there isn’t any planet Earth anymore—it was turned into a flaming sun!” Marshall interrupted coldly—but inwardly he was feverish. He swiftly checked over the Springer agents’ thoughts and the result put him somewhat more at ease. Neither one took the hint seriously—for them Perry

Rhodan had long since disappeared into space with the Titan and the Earth destroyed under the fire of Arkon bombs 50 years before!

Marshall still did not know why the folder in his hand was as important as Egmon suggested.

“Ixt,” said Egmon with good-natured restraint, “I wouldn’t have risked getting this if Rohun hadn’t pressed it on us to go through fire for you. What you now hold in your hand is the positronic evaluation of all the inquiries made about you by the Ara Secret Service!”

“Surely they’ll notice the file is missing!” Marshall knew about the Aras and their bureaucratic red tape—it was as tedious and overly precise as on Earth.

“18 agents in the field, Ixt!” Tulin reminded him. “3 of them are employed in the Ara Secret Service! Ixt, there is now no mention of you in any file anywhere on Tolimon! Isn’t that enough for you...?”

At that moment all the ray-screens in the Hall of Dreams collapsed!

Arkonides and Springers, man-like beings from faraway worlds here to throw themselves into the arms of their addiction, broke out in loud protests. People lay in a stupor on the floor everywhere one looked. The rayscreens inducing invisibility had disappeared and the famous security of the Hall of Dreams was no more.

A giant loudspeaker boomed: “The Ara Secret Service has blocked every exit! No one leaves the Hall of Dreams!”

Tulin and Egmon stared at John Marshall. Written on their faces was—*Now they’ve got us!*

John Marshall calmly put the file into his pocket and stood up, nodding commandingly to the 2 Springer agents. Near them stood a group of excited Galactic Traders and John Marshall idly walked over. Tulin and Egmon followed, although it mattered little to them where they were when the Secret Service checked them.

While Marshall outwardly pretended to be an attentively listening Springer following the conversation, he tried to concentrate as much as he could on remembering how many exits the Hall of Dreams had.

To one after the other he sent his searching thoughts and at the 5th exit he had to smile.

He quietly gave Tulin and Egmon the sign to follow him.

They strolled as though bored towards the 5th egress, where 6-armed Aras were standing guard—men from the Secret Service! 3 of them were exceptionally unhappy with their tour of duty today, since they had had to cancel all their private plans for what should have been their day off. While mentally examining the guards at each exit, Marshall had become aware of their discontent.

Thus those particular Aras became victims of his psychobeamer even as they stood guard in the Hall of Dreams. Then Marshall took on the 3 remaining, more zealous Aras. Egmon tried to bother him about something but he persevered with

his efforts. Marshall did, however, give Egmon such an angry look that the Springer fell back a step and changed his eye colour in terror.

The psychobeamer streamed Marshall's will unceasingly at the Aras, transmitting to them the order to let Marshall and his companions through after a make-believe strict check.

While at 3 other exits—especially at the main exit, the noise and protests were growing louder than ever, there was little for the 6 Aras to do at Exit #5.

They looked up curiously when they noticed Marshall and the Springers approaching.

Tulin moaned. "And here I've got 3 different ray-pistols on me! I'd better throw them away before—"

"Don't throw anything away!" Marshall growled at him, managing somehow to accommodate this tiny interruption in his hypnotic influence over the Aras.

Tulin, too, was forced to be quiet by the sheer pressure of Marshall's authoritative glance.

Then they stood at Exit #5.

A pair of Aras tended to each Galactic Trader.

John Marshall was searched by 2 grim-looking officers. Tulin broke out in a cold sweat from all pores, standing as he was directly behind Marshall and seeing the Positronic file in one of the Aras' hands. Then he remembered his 3 ray-pistols which the Aras were even now removing from his pockets!

I've had it now! thought Tulin, not even daring to breathe.

And then the Aras put the pistols back in his pockets!

"You can pass!" growled an Ara, throwing a curse after them.

Finding themselves still free, Egmon and Tulin were as happy as little children but they couldn't understand why they hadn't been arrested.

"Do you know why the Secret Service raided the Hall of Dreams?" Marshall asked them once they had gained the street and were engulfed by the passing throngs.

"Certainly not because of us," said Tulin doubtfully. He thought of his 3 ray-pistols, how the Aras, had found them and yet had not seemed to react. And most of all, how he had not been arrested.

"It was because of Egmon!" John Marshall said, looking at each of them in turn. "The Aras must have installed their watch-robots everywhere at once. A Watcher must have seen Egmon taking the file out of the Secret Service Tron and sounded the alarm!"

The tall, white-blond Springer went pale. He could guess the consequences but Tulin, the red-haired daredevil, was cut from a different cloth.

Tulin looked at John Marshall in distrust. "Ixt, you seem weirder to me all the time! Why are you trying to pressure us with your shameless lies? What did we do to deserve that?"

Tulin's question was justified. He believed that the animal dealer had known

nothing of their action against the Ara Secret Service—therefore his contention that a watch-robot had spotted Egmon at the Positronic could be only a bald-faced lie.

“Watch out...!” was all Marshall could say. Right then he had time for nothing other than to take care of an Ara from the secret service who had suddenly appeared. Intent on his mission, to judge from the look on his face, the Ara was going straight for Egmon through an open space in the crowd.

The Ara stood even now in front of the white-blond Springer, his hand shoved in a pocket whose bulge meant he had a ray-pistol zeroed in on Egmon.

“Egmon of the Rohun Clan!” snarled the Ara and grabbed for him.

Half-unconsciously, John Marshall pushed Tulin’s arm back down before the redhead could attempt anything. Then Tulin exhaled a curse, mainly to gasp for breath because the Ara—just seconds before a walking personification of grim and relentless duty—had suddenly become the very picture of warm friendliness. His steel grip on Egmon’s shoulder melted into a hearty backslap and then came pleasant small talk—“I’ve really enjoyed seeing you again, Egmon! Well, I’ve got to run along now, so until next time, good luck!”

He nodded, friendly as a puppy, took his hand out of his gun pocket and departed.

Both of the Springers were badly confused. “Ixt, you’re uncanny! What did you do to the Ara to make him change his attitude so suddenly?”

“Luck like that we probably won’t have the next time, said Marshall, avoiding the question. “Egmon, now will you believe a watch-robot saw you at the Secret Service Positronic?”

Egmon had an opportunity to answer only some minutes later, once, the 3 had descended to a lower traffic level and stepped aboard a public transport that would take them out of the city as quickly as possible. Even then, Egmon only posed a counter-question. “By all the stars, Ixt-how *do* you know that?”

And to that, too, John Marshall could give no answer. “What are you going to do, Egmon?”

Egmon muttered his reply. “Rohun’s got to come back and pick me up because once the Aras are on somebody’s tail they get him sooner or later! Now nothing’s going to come of my deal with the 5000 shaks!”

Perry Rhodan’s mutant could only admire the reserved Springer agent’s cold-blooded courage.

6/ LOVE LEAPS 4 CENTURIES

For 2 days Marshall lived in a state of constant tension, expecting to be jumped at any minute by the Ara secret service. But when nothing of the sort happened, he gradually relaxed.

His second visit to Kalex, head of Central Purchasing, was not for the sake of courtesy. By way of the influential man he hoped to come in contact with the group of galactic physicians responsible for manufacture of the life-giving and prolonging serum. That was why he had offered Kalex the shipment of unknown creatures from the stench-planet in the first place. That he had made a good profit on the deal did not interest him in the least.

Kalex was brimming over with charming friendliness. Their conversation naturally revolved around the unusual animals.

“Animals?” Kalex was saying. “That isn’t the right word at all. We found only 8 species that could be called animals. All the rest are intelligent! Some are even smarter than our frogs! That was the greatest sensation of all and you wouldn’t believe all the recognition I’ve received for risking a 2 million purchase!” Kalex was beaming and according to what the mutant found in his thoughts, filled with nothing but gratitude for Marshall.

“I suppose it’s too bad for these intelligent aliens that they were caught,” John offered.

Here he had hit a sore point and Kalex protested hotly, speaking of research and serum carriers and then about serum manufacture itself. “We’re helpless without serum carriers, Ixt! Every serum carrier must be healthy or otherwise his affliction will ruin the results! I swear to you—captive intelligences don’t have it so good anywhere else as in our zoo!”

“Were the intelligent creatures from the stench-planet put behind energy barriers, too?”

Kalex told the truth. “For the time being, yes. We have a task—I can’t speak of it—a task of galactic importance that requires us to treat our captives in this fashion! We Aras are miracle workers in medicine but we aren’t magicians and... Ixt, you look at me so oddly, so reproachfully. I know what you’re thinking! You surely know the law set down by the ruling Positronic on Arkon... Ixt, when the stakes are so high, even breaking the law can be justified!”

“Hmmm,” murmured the mutant, reading Kalex’s thoughts, which centred

entirely around the life-prolonging serum. For its production, the Aras needed intelligent beings in levels C, B and even A! In holding intelligent beings captive and using their bodies as natural serum producers, the Aras were breaking one of Arkon's strictest laws. Were the infraction to be discovered, it could mean instant annihilation of all the Ara worlds.

The robot Brain on Arkon knew no feelings. It acted solely on the basis of the logic of its programming.

With his vague hints Kolex had already betrayed far too much—and his thoughts betrayed even more!

Together, everything formed conclusive proof for Marshall that the Aras had long passed the experimental stage of their work and were now manufacturing the life-prolonging serum in large quantities.

"Now I just hope I don't have any more trouble with the Ara Secret Service," John said to himself as he took his leave from Kolex and went down the Street of the Great Moh towards his shop.

* * * *

4 people from the Earth of the 17th Century lived behind an insurmountable energy barrier in Tolimon's enormous zoo.

Laury Marten had met all of them: Mtumbo, the superstitious and dull-witted Kaffir; Alf Tornsten, who lived apathetically from day to day, broken in mind and spirit by the to him incomprehensible fact that he was not growing older; Nara, a worn-out old Mongolian, keeping to herself in her nomad's hut. She was insane and no longer able to speak rationally.

Like Alf Tornsten, Mtumbo spoke only a mangled and broken Intercosmo Duke Rodrigo de Berceo, however, was brilliant in the language and when Laury Marten came to visit him for the 3rd time, they conversed in the Arkonide of the "Upper 10,000".

The Aztec palace concealed a secret that made 2 persons happy: Laury Marten and Duke Rodrigo were in love!

It had come over them like a deluge—stormy, forceful... and wonderful. Their love bridged the gulf of 4 centuries.

In love, the beautiful mutant continually forgot that she had been sent by Perry Rhodan to Tolimon on a mission. Even though the lives of Thora and Khrest depended on the success of that mission, she forgot nonetheless.

From Duke Rodrigo, Laury Marten learned how at the age of 22 he had been riding through his parents' estate when he saw something shaped like a cylinder shoot through the clouds. He had been frightened and tried to flee but a small flying thing picked him up and took him on board what turned out to be a Springer ship. The Springers shut him up in a cabin with 3 other people: Mtumbo, Alf Tornsten and Nara; and little attention was paid to them until they were

unloaded at Trulan. Now they lived like animals in a zoo.

Laury had decided to forego explaining to him what she had meant by zoo but on the 2nd visit she had not forgotten to ask Rodrigo de Berceo why he had aged only slightly in 400 years.

In reply, Rodrigo spoke of a mighty palace and the more he talked about it the more clearly Laury recognized it as X-p. He had been taken there again and again, examined in procedures lasting for days and finally given an injection of the life-prolonging serum.

“The day will come when I show the Aras with my sword that I am *Duke* Rodrigo and no degenerate Aztec! Here, my gorgeous flower, gaze upon this shining blade—soon to drink deeply of the blood of my tormentors!” And with a theatrical gesture that might have belonged to the courtly customs of the 17th Century, he ripped his short sword out of its scabbard.

Laury Marten, the practical-minded girl of the 21st Century, was in love, and love enchanted all it touched. Addressed as a “gorgeous flower”, looking into the flashing and passion-filled eyes of her lover, feeling his strong arms about her—all this made her happy. All her thoughts revolved around one point only—freeing Rodrigo from Ara captivity!

Rodrigo could not remember just when he had last received the life-prolonging serum but it was about 90 years before, Earth time.

What did 90 years mean to Aras who often lived to be over 800 years old?

The information that Laury obtained from Rodrigo was important because it confirmed that the serum was being made in X-p.

Again and again Laury felt her conscience remind her just why she was on Tolimon—and then hours of self-reproach and guilty feelings followed. And each time it happened, she promised herself to tell Marshall about her love for Rodrigo de Berceo during their next telepathic exchange.

However—John Marshall as yet *still* knew nothing of it!

* * * *

Laury Marten finally tore herself away from Rodrigo. She had been with him for over 2 hours, Tolimon time, and now she stepped through the gap in the energy barrier created by her disintegrative ability.

Then, as she was walking towards her vehicle, the head of a frog appeared over the rim of the long, deep gully on her left and stared at her with its serpent gaze.

As though rooted to the spot, Laury Marten stopped and stood stock-still. She tried to pick up the frog’s thoughts but with no success—in her excitement she could not find the frequency on which the frog’s mind operated.

The frog’s voice was cold and even colder was the glitter in its staring eyes. “It will interest the Aras very much to learn that you can walk through energy

barriers without having to turn them off, Arga Silm.”

Her first impulse was to destroy the frog with her raypistol but Perry Rhodan’s rule of killing only in an emergency was too deeply imbedded within her mind to let her.

Her situation now was an emergency but only because she had been negligent. She was still strong enough not to deceive herself on that score but she felt exhausted nonetheless. She half-unconsciously reached into her pocket, found a concentrated energy tablet and swallowed it.

Its effect was immediate and so obvious that the frog had to ask, “What was that you just swallowed, Arga Silm?”

While desperately trying to think of a way out, she told him.

“May I try one of those tablets?” asked the frog—that monstrous mixture of centipede and snake—leaving the gully and coming up to Laury Marten. It stretched an arm to her that ended in a grasping claw.

Thinking only to win time, Laury gave the frog a tablet. She expected nothing else—but when the frog swallowed the tablet, it stiffened! Laury was frightened and inconspicuously slipped her hand into her gun pocket. As far as she was concerned, the frog had to die.

The frog’s hideous laugh forced her a few steps back. Laughing even harder, it raised the first third of its body and regarded Perry Rhodan’s agent from a height of 2 yards. “Did I frighten you, Arga Silm? Please excuse me because I only wanted to thank you!”

“By turning me in to the Aras?” demanded Laury, who felt herself being mocked in her hopeless plight.

“Arga Silm,” the frog went on, its voice dropping to a whisper, “I’ll do nothing of the kind if you bring me a thousand energy tablets tomorrow. Do that and I’ll be your most faithful servant, Arga Silm.” A gurgling laugh ended his most peculiar-sounding suggestion.

Suddenly Laury realized what state the frog was in the concentrated energy tablet had made it euphoric! The tablet had the effect of a stimulant on it, inducing an exaggerated happiness!

The frog’s condition grew increasingly disordered. The viper-stare disappeared. The eyes radiated an almost human good nature and then it resumed begging, wheedling her to bring it vast quantities of tablets the next day or the day after.

“If I can depend upon your silence, Agzt,” Laury answered.

In reply she heard: “I could have even turned the energy barrier off for you, Arga Silm! Can’t we trust each other on that basis?”

When Laury Marten had finished her day’s work in X-p that evening, the frog Agzt had still not reported her slipping through the energy barrier.

She slowly began to believe that Agzt had meant it honestly.

7/ LAURY'S OWN DEATH SENTENCE

John Marshall had sent his 5th message to Hellgate over the hypercom in his office and now switched the device to Rohun's frequency.

He had no fear of being overheard by the Ara surveillance. The special equipment, as with the other hypercom in his slum quarters, was protected against eavesdropping even if the receiving unit was only a normally equipped hypercom. But for safety's sake, Marshall and Rohun made use of a distorter and coder when contact between them was established.

"Rohun, I need my spacer! Who can bring it to Trulan. Otznam?"

The Springer captain's face twisted into a grimace. "Ixt," he warned, "give up your dangerous game with the Aras! What Egmon told me made me a hundred years older! And if it goes on like this, I'll end up on the Aras' list—and you know what that means!"

That meant—vanishing without a trace! Death! Destruction!

Marshall was unimpressed by Rohun's warning. I'd feel a lot better if I knew my spacecraft was here, Rohun! When can I figure on its arrival? Otznam is bringing it, right?"

"Yes, but don't use Otznam for any of your half-baked schemes," Rohun answered. "And when are you ever going to tell me what kind of nonsense went on in your shop when this Ara Huxul from the secret service came in with the 2 hiobargulloos and wanted to give them back? If I hadn't experienced something similar with this Huxul myself, I would have packed Otznam off to an Ara hospital to have his head examined!"

Marshall did not discuss the matter any further. He calmed the Springer captain. "I promise I won't give, Otznam anything to do. But can I still depend on your pledge of standing at my side with all your forces when I call upon your help?"

"I'm a Galactic Trader, Ixt!" Rohun thundered from 40 light-years away. "Not an Ara! I'm sending Otznam out with your craft immediately! Say... I was looking the thing over the other day and your spacecraft is a battleship pure and simple! Where do they build ships like that, Ixt?"

That, too, Marshall ignored. "Where's Tulin hiding, Rohun? I can't find him in Trulan."

"Here!" Rohun replied. "But he's flying back with Otznam because I have something for him to do. You can't use him for anything, either, Ixt!"

“Afraid?” asked John Marshall tersely.

“Better to be afraid than an Ara guinea pig.”

Again the veiled references and this time Rohun the Springer captain had made them. The threat of being made an Ara guinea pig—and in spite of Arkon law!

“Over and out, Rohun!” said John Marshall to the Galactic Trader and switched off.

Laury Marten’s telepathic message had started to come in. Marshall listened to the voice that seemed to speak inside his mind.

An hour later, the 2nd coded hypercom message went out to Hellgate, where Rhodan was waiting in the protection of the steel dome.

In X-p Laury Marten had discovered a chamber in which a capsule of the life-prolonging serum was being stored for an experiment to be undertaken in the near future!

When Futgris entered his boss’ office, Ixt sat reading the first report Kalex had sent him. In it, the creatures he had sold to the zoo were graded according to their intelligence levels.

21 different species, all varying wildly in their appearance, carried the mark of Intelligence Level A!

Level A included the Arkonides, the Aras and the Galactic Traders!

When John Marshall looked up and recognized Futgris, he had first to detach himself from his horror.

He felt like a man who had just committed a crime! Creatures, whose repulsive and horrible appearance had led him into thinking of them as beasts, had turned out to be highly intelligent—and he had made them into a zoo’s showpieces, he had put them right into the Aras’ hands—and Rohun’s voice seemed to drone again in Marshall’s ears: “Better to be afraid than an Ara guinea pig!”

Now he looked questioningly at Futgris.

The Ara, who admired his superior immensely, tried to hide the trembling in his voice. “Sir,” he said, his eyes reflecting his fear, “3 officers from the Secret Service want to talk to you!”

“So?” said John Marshall without allowing his disquiet to show. Slowly he shoved Kalex’ report to one side. “Show the gentlemen in, Futgris! One should never keep officers of the Secret Service waiting!”

* * * *

Agzt, the frog, stood at the roadside and watched while Laury Marten drove her vehicle towards the path, braked and climbed out. She offered the frog a small bag, which it greedily took into its claw-like hand and opened.

“Again only 50 tablets?” said the frog, disappointed.

Laury, who had lost all her fear of the easily bribed serpent-monster, laid her hand on its neck. The frog’s skin felt like leather. She saw its euphoric state and

admonished: "I'll bring you 50 tablets each time I visit, Agzt, but no more than that. I wouldn't like for this preparation, which is quite harmless for Arkonides and Aras, to make you sick or addicted. Ration out your supply, too, because it could happen that some days might go by between my visits."

The tiny bag lay closed in the large grasping hand. The frog capered about on its many legs and assured her over and over that it was not ungrateful.

As she had done on her previous visits, Laury told the creature to keep a lookout and warn her immediately if another vehicle should approach this part of the zoo. Then she stepped through the energy barrier as though it did not exist and ran from there.

From the ridge she could see the Aztec palace. As always, Rodrigo stood waiting for her in the great doorway but today he did not wave to her with his plumed hat.

Even when they stood face to face, he looked at her dumbly.

"Darling, has something happened?" she asked.

Rodrigo de Berceo stood rigid before her. His gaze wandered off into the distance. His mouth was no more than a tight line and his eyes blazed in indignation. Laury threw her arms around him and implored him to say something.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I must go to the Aras!"

For her, that had the same meaning as the destruction of all Tolimon.

"Rodrigo, no! That can't be so! No, no Her desperation was like a lump in her throat. She was shaken by a racking sob.

Then she caught hold of herself. As she calmed down, her power of clear thinking returned. And then she had her plan!

"Rodrigo, when will the Aras pick you up?" she asked quickly.

"Tomorrow, but fear not for my life...! Duke—?"

"When tomorrow? Tomorrow morning? At what time?"

Even though Duke Rodrigo de Berceo spoke Intercosmo and Arkonese fluently, he had only a hazy idea of how to tell time. Only after much cross-questioning could Laury determine about when Rodrigo would be taken away for testing.

"Listen to me," she said, her eyes bright with triumph. "When the Aras come tomorrow, they'll find the whole enclosure empty! I'll flee with the 4 of you! Come—let's tell the others so they can get ready!"

Laury Marten did not realize that in that moment she had just thrown her entire training as an agent in the Mutant Corps overboard. Her plan was not only amateurish, it was dangerous. It would force John Marshall into taking measures he would otherwise have never considered.

Alf Tornsten, the Swedish farmer, gave her the first refusal. Nara, the old Mongolian woman, did not understand at all what the young girl wanted and laughed crazily. Mtumbo, the Kaffir, only swore at her and left her standing in the middle of the enclosure.

Rodrigo had expected as much but when he commented, “I’ve never felt comfortable in the presence of these louts,” Laury rebuked him for the first time with icy sharpness.

“Would you please get it through your head that 400 years have gone by on Earth! A Duke is worth no more than the poorest man now! Rodrigo, you’ve got to bridge these 4 centuries! Please let me help you—please forget that you are Duke de Berceo! Start right now and then...”

Again his charm, his smile and his love conquered her. His kiss closed her mouth. She felt safe and protected in his arms until the terrible reality reminded her once more of tomorrow.

“Rodrigo, the Aras will never find you here again, tomorrow!” With that promise she broke from him, and minutes later, was racing in her vehicle back towards X-p.

On the way she communicated telepathically with John Marshall.

Don’t disturb me! was the reply she got from him. Laury Marten was so concerned with Rodrigo’s fate that she simply failed to notice Marshall’s wild excitement.

As though in a trance, she entered X-p and was again disinfected by the beams of light. She went to her office and sat down at her desk. She looked about in desperation and her eyes met those of the Ara physician Azza.

“What’s wrong, Arga?” His question frightened her.

“A headache,” she said—and then realized she had just pronounced her own death sentence!

On the worlds of the Arkonide Imperium—no matter whether inhabited by Springers, Aras or Arkonides, no one had headaches! The affliction was unknown to those 3 closely related races!

But in that instant Laury Marten had also become Perry Rhodan’s agent once more!

She did not lose her self-control. She cold-bloodedly penetrated Azza’s mind with her telepathic power and examined the contents.

He had ransacked her office while she was gone!

He had sent spies after her for the second time to report back what she was doing in the zoo so often!

He did not trust her in the least!

And now he no longer believed she was even an Arkonide! He let his memory run free—once more he thought of Perry Rhodan, of Aras and the physician world of Aralon, of the moon Laros—yes, and then came the destruction of Rhodan’s home world, Earth, and Rhodan’s complete disappearance with the gigantic *Titan*.

Azza suddenly realized that his suspicion of this young woman as an agent for Perry Rhodan was silly—but headaches?

Who *was* this young woman?

All this she found out in a matter of seconds and with that in mind, Laury

Marten attacked! She secretly switched on the videophone and said: "I'm going to tell Man Regg that you ransacked my office while I was gone, Azza!"

It was a dangerous risk she took but it paid off!

Without thinking, the Ara cried out. "How do you know? Who betrayed me?" He stopped and regained his self-control.

"Thanks," said Laury Marten, smiling at him and pointing to the activated v'phone. A hundred Aras had certainly overheard the brief exchange. Laury needed no more witnesses than that. Calmly she stood up. "I know I don't have your sympathy, Azza, but I do have some good friends. Should I tell you where I was in the zoo today? It will spare you the bother of sending spies out after me for a 3rd time tomorrow..."

She laughed as he pushed his way out of the room. His face was white as a scheedt (An albino animal worlds-famous for its intensely white fur), and he was mumbling something she could not understand with her ears. But she read his thoughts—they were a confusion of fear that the Arkonide girl would carry out her threat of reporting the situation to Man Regg.

Man Regg already knew about it, thanks to the open videophone circuit. Half an hour later he sent a robot out of Azza, who was ordered to leave X-p immediately and report for duty on the planet Durrha.

Durrha was the world carrying the most warning notations in the Arkon Star Catalogue. On Durrha, the Aras studied incurable diseases—most of them contagious. No one who once set foot on that world ever left it again!

Accompanied by 2 robots, Azza was driven to the Trulan spaceport. The robots remained at his side until he had entered the assigned spaceship and stood guard in front of the ship until it had taken off.

* * * *

John Marshall had seen the 3 men from the Secret Service come and now he saw them go again.

Like Huxul and many others, they had fallen victim to his combination of telepathy and psychobeamer but Marshall did not, let himself be deceived into believing that the danger was over.

The opposite was true. Once the hypnotic effect on them had worn off, the danger would be Eke an avalanche. Yet, the visit of the 3 Aras did have its advantages: he finally knew why the Ara Secret Service was so hot on his trail.

These 3 Aras had come only to examine his business affairs for the second time. They had requested his papers for examination and had intended to record a sample of his brainwave pattern, although they did not get around to the latter. They left 3 hours later in the best of spirits. By noon of the next day at the latest, the hypnotic effect would wear off and they would realize that something inexplicable had taken place during their call on Ixt.

Marshall knew that the growing number of inexplicable events would have to arouse the greatest alarm in the Ara Secret Service and when somebody put all the evidence together the Secret Service would strike ruthlessly!

In the middle of his reflections, the v'phone signalled. The caller was Otznam, who was at the spaceport. He had just landed a few minutes before in John Marshall's small spacecraft. The mutant wanted to ask the Springer a question but Otznam broke the connection too soon.

"Alright, I won't ask you," he said to himself. Marshall concentrated on trying to call Laury Marten. She had wanted to contact him for some reason when he was busy putting the Aras in his office under the power of his Will.

Laury Marten did not reply!

He tried again, increasing his concentration, and this time he found her. But now *she* told him not to bother her!

Marshall immediately broke off and tried to determine just what he had learned during his brief exchange with Laury Marten.

What was she looking for in X-p? Her telepathic strength had struck him like an electric shock but she was not using it to pick up his thoughts. She had been trying to fight them off.

8/ DANGER IN THE DESERT

There was no idleness in X-p.

The very nature of the place demanded activity and the Aras willingly did their utmost to be active. They worked as though possessed; a fire burned within them, driving them on to uncover the final secrets of life. They had often thought they were standing on the verge of attaining their goal but just as often they had found their research had only raised more questions than it answered.

Laury Marten's work was finished for the day. The episode with Azza, just 3 hours before, had already been forgotten. Instead, the proud young Mexican, Rodrigo de Berceo, claimed all of Laury Marten's thoughts even though she had to devote her attention to other things in order to concentrate on her plan.

Eyes closed and hands behind her head, she lay on her bed and searched with her telepathic power every room in X-p where she had even the slightest suspicion manufacture of the life-prolonging serum might take place.

Onward—to the next room: 3 Aras—their thoughts—nothing. On to the next room. Empty? No—but only robots here.

In spite of her concentration, she remembered Marshall's warning concerning the newly installed watch-robots.

To the next room.

The hours went by. The sun sank in the north and night settled over X-p and the continental zoo.

Laury Marten did not give up. She carried on to save Rodrigo—and to be able to stand before Perry Rhodan. She did not want to be the first mutant in his Corps who had failed in her mission because of love.

Nothing—nothing—nothing anywhere!

Nowhere was she able to find clues that indicated where the formula for the serum was to be found.

Midnight came and Laury Marten still lay in deepest concentration on her bunk, searching ever onwards—to no avail!

Finally, drenched in sweat, she got up. Should she contact Marshall now?

She decided not to. After showering and dressing, she left the apartment.

The antigravitor brought her to the 5th subterranean level. When she tried to open the door to enter the area, she found it locked. Locked doors certainly

presented little problem to someone able to dissolve the molecular bonds of solid objects. No matter what their substance, even solid walls became as though misty clouds when Laury concentrated on them. After that, walking through was the easiest thing in the world.

Still in the lift, Laury brought her mental strength to bear on the door blocking her way. Then she simply stepped through it. Once she had passed, the door regained its solid nature.

Before her stretched the usual corridor. It looked like any other hall in any other part of X-p

She rendered 2 ray barriers inoperative. The alarm they would have set off was not sounded. The corridor lay empty and threatening in front of her but neither the emptiness nor the length of it disturbed her. Her telepathic sense of detection searched for Aras and found them sitting, bent over their work, behind the doors she passed. No one listened to her footsteps.

Onwards! Never before had she been so silent while on a mission!

Suddenly, Thora—Perry Rhodan's wife—came to mind. Before Laury and John Marshall had been sent to Tolimon, Rhodan had openly and candidly explained the stakes for which they were playing. For the sake of Thora and Khrest, they had to find out at all costs if the vague rumours were true—if the Aras had in fact discovered a serum to prolong life.

And now, Laury Marten was on her way to the room where some of that same serum which the Arkonides needed so desperately was stored in a thick-walled capsule.

Far ahead of Laury, a door opened. An Ara came out into the hall and glanced in her direction without really noticing her. He started walking towards her but 10 paces before they would have met, he turned and entered a laboratory.

The girl mutant's pace had not slowed, nor were her steps any less certain. Rod-ri-go said her footsteps. The name, even by itself, gave her strength. And she needed it.

This section of X-p, buried 5 stories deep in the ground, was the most secret research centre the Aras had! Everything else was at best only secondary. Here was life in capsules. Whoever received an injection of the serum lived on—anyone else had to die!

Laury Marten reached into her pocket.

The pocket was empty!

She had taken a shower and afterwards she had donned fresh clothes, forgetting to take the tuning fork out of her smock pocket. She had been too busy thinking about Rodrigo de Berceo!

Turn around?

Rod-ri-go said her footsteps. She did not turn around. She felt that she had gone too far already to turn back. It was now or never.

Only 30 more steps to got

Only 10 more...

Only 21 She stood at the door, probing ahead with her telepathic power. Perceiving no thoughts in the laboratory beyond, she decided it must be unoccupied.

The door lost its molecular binding, becoming as though nothing in the face of the girl mutant's disintegrative power. Laury stepped into the room. She knew where the capsule lay. The Ara who had put it there had been a careful person and had wondered if it would be safe there—and thoughts such as these had been like a beacon to Laury.

The laboratory was brilliant in the flooding light. Relays clicked gently, reels of computer tape spun and boiling liquids pulsed through transparent tubing.

The girl mutant stopped behind the once more solid door.

3 robots sat observing the progress of an experiment. Alarms went off in Laury's mind. Which one of the 3 was the Watcher?

Her hand slipped into her pocket. Her fingers closed firmly around the butt of her ray-pistol while she glanced from one robot to another, looking in vain for some distinguishing characteristic that would identify the Watcher. Still standing hidden behind the door, she heard their metal joints creak softly and she watched their almost human movements.

She had to go past all 3! The serum lay behind them.

How could I have forgotten the tuning fork? she demanded reproachfully of herself, remembering what effort it had cost her to make a G sharp tuning fork on the equipment in X-p's maintenance department.

Suddenly she thought she was seeing Rodrigo's face before her and hearing him say once more "...but tomorrow I'll not be receiving any injection of life-giving elixir. Instead, I shall have to breathe of a vapour that will precipitate an immediate advance of old age! The Ara who told me of this amidst all his smiles had accomplished the same feat with Nara, the Mongolian. When they came for her, she was young and happy, but upon her return, she had become an ancient hag, her mind quite gone."

Laury walked past the mechanical men. They did not even look up.

Half turning, the mutant stretched her hand out to the large capsule. As her fingers closed around it, she noticed the sign next to it and read the few words written there: 'Hutwasd-c8-0.75 Cudd...'

Hutwasd, a creature more or less humanoid in appearance except for its monstrous head, was also an inmate of the Ara zoo. Because of his high intelligence, the Aras had classified him on Level C3, the same rank as Rodrigo. And 0.75 Cudd was about 3ccs.

There was more but Laury was not able to read it—one of the robots had turned its head towards her! The Watcher!

An aperture on its flat metal forehead opened briefly, revealing a fluorescent lens focused directly on Laury.

The alarm went off in the X-p Security Central but that was not the worst of it. Laury's picture was transmitted there, as well, and within minutes every Ara in the gigantic research complex knew that the Arkonide girl Arga Silm had been observed in the act of stealing the most secret serum of all.

The shot from her ray-pistol at the robot was a reflex action. The beam melted its positronic unit and Laury Marten had to spring lightly to one side as the mechman collapsed and fell to the floor. The serum-capsule was secure in her hand.

Was that the alarm howling so insanely?

Laury's next gun-burst blasted the videophone. She glanced at the ceiling, then placed the capsule in her inner pocket. She hastened back to the door, climbed on top of a cabinet standing there and dissolved the molecular bond of the ceiling above her. She reached through, took hold of the solid edges of the disintegrative field and pulled herself up.

A very old Ara stood in front of her, trembling in every limb. His comprehension had been well nigh-shattered by seeing a girl crawl up through the floor of his laboratory. She stood up and aimed her weapon at him.

"Turn around!" she ordered in a tone that would tolerate no nonsense. Then she leaped atop a table and climbed from there to a cabinet. She again made a portion of the ceiling impalpable and slipped through it.

This time she emerged to face Sagala, who had been lured from the adjoining room by some noise she had made coming in. Laury Marten had met the Director of the Galactic Zoo only once before and the words they exchanged on that occasion had been few.

Sagala gasped for air when Laury trained the raypistol on him. She was now the ice-cool, resourceful and skilled Rhodan agent. "Sagala," she said to the zoo director, who ranked above even Man Regg in rank and power, "you will help me get out of this building—unless you would like to die right now!"

Sagala said nothing. Nor did he move. He could only stare at the young girl with the gun.

The alarm still sounded throughout X-p. A warning was broadcast over the intercom from the Security Central: "All exits are blocked by battle-robots! Anyone attempting to leave X-p will be destroyed!"

I Laury's voice was almost friendly when she again addressed Sagala: "Will you be so kind as to accompany me to the next exit? I'd feel ever so much safer if you were with me! Please, Sagala!"

The threat of her weapon left him no choice. But, as he went past her to the door, he hissed: "You won't get far, Arkonide spy!"

The place in the floor Laury had come through had sunk rather deeply and Sagala doubted if it would hold his weight. When he turned and looked back at the young girl, he went pale.

At the door, his face again lost all its colour. Laury had just warned him: "Sagala, I'll shoot before you can give any alarm!"

He did not suspect that she had read his mind but her warning and threat had robbed him of all his courage. Trembling from cowardice, he stepped out into the hall. Laury followed close behind.

* * * *

John Marshall was jolted out of a deep sleep when, Laury Marten's telepathic message struck him at full concentration. What did she have to tell him?

Flight clear through the zoo? Who was with her Duke Rodrigo de Berceo? What had happened? At that moment X-p was alarming the entire planet and mobilizing the zoo's guardians, the terrible frogs!

"I couldn't leave him in the lurch, John. We're heading now in a south-southwest direction and are going to try to lose ourselves with the vehicle somewhere in the desert..."

With an oath, John Marshall sprang out of bed and into his clothes. Although his departure resembled a mad rush to escape, he did not lose his self-control. When he thought of Laury Marten, however, he began to boil internally. What was wrong with that girl? Had she fallen in love with Rodrigo de Berceo? That was something he only now realized.

"She's gone crazy!" he exclaimed. It made him feel a little better, at least, to say that, but it did nothing to alter the fact that the whole Ara planet was being alarmed and that an entire world was pursuing Laury Marten and Rodrigo de Berceo.

John Marshall would have been even angrier had he known just how Laury Marten had left X-p.

She and Sagala had hardly reached X-p's ground floor when 3 battle-robots and a dozen excited Aras suddenly appeared at the entrance to an antigrav lift.

"Here she is!" Sagala had cried in ultimate desperation, believing his outburst would mean his death at the hands of the Arkonide girl behind him.

But there was no Arkonide girl behind him any longer—Laury Marten had used her disintegrative power to force her way through the walls of X-p. Through laboratories and their furnishings she ran—seeming like a ghost to the many Aras who saw her emerge from one wall, dash through a room and disappear into the opposite wall.

She came out into the open far from the guarded exits. The starlight allowed her to find a vehicle quickly and with it she raced through the Galactic Zoo to the place where 4 people had been kept behind energy barriers like animals for 4 centuries.

Agzt the frog, swaying in euphoria, turned off the energy barrier when Laury and her car shot through. In the whirl of his unwholesome rapture, the serpent-monster failed to realize that he had just committed suicide. Frogs well aware of the general alarm came from all sides and saw with their sharp night vision that

one of the zoo's inmates was climbing into Laury's vehicle. They also saw how the escape had been made possible and Agzt's life ended at the hands of his fellows.

Meanwhile, Laury Marten, with Rodrigo at her side, accelerated the vehicle to the limit and struck south-southwest, attempting to leave the zoo and reach the desert.

* * * *

Never before had the Trulan spaceport seemed so far away as it did to John Marshall that night. After what seemed like an endless ride on the public transport, he reached the spaceport station. He hurried out of the express car and leaped into the antigravitor. Once on the ground, he mingled with the crowds of people and human-like intelligences, trying to make his haste seem less conspicuous.

His small spacer, which Otznam had only recently delivered to Trulan from Rohun's cylindrical Springer ship, stood at the other end of the plaza.

Marshall went down into the underground transport system, which crisscrossed the spaceport at various levels beneath its surface and provided the quickest and safest means for passengers and crews to reach their spaceships.

Marshall, one of Perry Rhodan's oldest mutants, became somewhat more relaxed—as long as he did not think about Laury Marten's inexplicable action.

He was not disturbed by the fact that she had fallen in love with Rodrigo. After all, what could be more human? But Laury had told him only during her emergency telepathic message—and that was something he did not understand.

That was a breach of trust! Nothing else! And what else might she still have kept secret from him?

At the end of the transport tube he found himself alone. He left the antigrav lift after making sure of his isolation. Only the centre of the spaceport and the 3 gigantic shipyards where even the largest spaceships could be repaired had been artificially lit; the rest of the spaceport lay shrouded in darkness.

John Marshall wiped the sweat from his brow. Even during the middle of the night, Tolimon was a hot world and the slightest exertion was tortuous.

Unseen and unhindered, he reached his small spacer, which even under a suspicious examination still looked like nothing more than a mere tourist vehicle. In reality, it was almost exactly what Rohun had exaggeratedly said it was: a pocket-sized battleship. It was an ultra-swift and heavily armed spacecraft capable of flying as easily and precisely through thick atmosphere as through empty space.

The propulsion unit idled. Radar, radio... all the equipment functioned. John Marshall looked at his watch: in 5 minutes he could take off.

Then 3 micro-loudspeakers rebroadcast some of the radio traffic in the air—all hell was loose on Tolimon!

Radar confirmed it. Every policecraft on Tolimon was airborne and streaking south-southwest.

And John Marshall had to fly into that horde of searching ships, find Laury Marten and her Rodrigo before the Aras did, take them on board and then make a run for it.

The last 5 minutes of warm-up time were over!

Muttering an imprecation, John Marshall took off, flying on a mission that did not promise even a 1% chance of success to either him or Laury Marten.

* * * *

“Rodrigo, put the sword away! You’re making me nervous with that toy of yours!” said Laury Marten energetically to the man at her side for the 3rd time while she raced the land-going vehicle at top speed through the desolate gravel desert.

Now she was making a turn on a steep slope, curving sharply to the left to avoid a wide gorge. The manoeuvre brought them almost automatically closer to the frogs approaching in pursuit from the south. The endurance of the intelligent serpent-monsters terrified her; she had long known that unless John Marshall came to help, she and Rodrigo would sooner or later fall into the grasping claw hands of the fearsome zoo guardians. The frogs kept up their inhuman pace, drawing inexorably nearer all the time!

“Hold on, Rodrigo!” Laury cried.

The son of a Spanish Grandee and an Aztec princess had spent 400 years in an energy cage and in that time he had only come in direct contact with the technology of the Arkon worlds once. He must have regarded the vehicle as a work of the Devil.

He did not hold on! He reacted too late. When Laury braked and threw the vehicle into an impossibly tight turn to avoid hitting a rock outcropping in their path, Rodrigo’s head was wrenched forward. He did not hear Laury Marten’s fear-filled cry—“Rodrigo!?”

He hung unconscious in his seat harness. His head was bowed, swinging limply to and fro.

The night passed and day broke over Tolimon. Along with the grey dawn came Marshall’s telepathic call.

She was to give him her position! But Laury Marten had no idea where in the desert she was.

Then she sped the vehicle into a narrow valley. The weathered mountains came together here, making a gully out of the valley—and a few hundred yards ahead she spotted a pale blue ray perpendicular to the valley floor, its deadly energy blasting the sheer rock into gas!

Aras! Police ships!

Now the search from the air for the fugitives had narrowed itself down considerably.

But... the deadly beam was enough of an energy source that John Marshall would surely be able to locate it with his equipment!

While her vehicle braked, slipping in the gravel and coming perilously close to the rocky walls of the gully, she was still calm enough to telepathically describe the Ara ship's attack to John Marshall.

"I've got him!" Marshall called back.

Seconds later, a tiny sun blazed over Tolimon's gravel desert. In its flame dissolved the Ara ship whose pale blue ray had missed Laury's vehicle by only a few hundred feet.

Out of the brilliance in the sky shot John Marshall's spacer. It made its way into the narrow valley, flew over the still molten rock and landed no more than 50 feet from Laury Marten. Then Marshall was standing in the small hatchway, waving excitedly for Laury Marten to hurry up.

The unconscious Duke de Berceo was too heavy a load for her. Marshall jumped from the hatch, ran over, grabbed the unconscious man out of the girl's arms and in the next moment shouted: "Get away!"

50 feet behind them his small spacecraft disappeared in a cloud of gas. A hungry energy beam had struck the space from the grey morning sky and now it was going for Laury's vehicle. The beam touched it—a low hiss, a burst of light and smoke... and nothing remained.

Nothing more than 3 people, 2 of them running for their lives in the direction from which the frogs were coming!

9/ RHODAN TO THE RESCUE

3 days later...

“Come on!” shouted John Marshall to Laury Marten and Rodrigo. “The frogs are still right behind us! That one was just the 3rd and...”

Then he saw the terror in Laury’s eyes. He whirled around—and what he saw took his breath away.

Frogs were coming from 3 directions at once, nearing their victims at incredible speed!

Then Duke Rodrigo de Berceo swiftly drew his sword and ran towards an attacking frog!

“The fool!” raged Marshall and then fired his raypistols, felling foe after foe.

But the 5th and final frog was still alive and it was towards this one Rodrigo dashed. John and Laury did not dare shoot for fear of hitting Rodrigo.

“Come back!” shouted Marshall in frantic desperation.

But it was too late!

Marshall closed his eyes. He had no wish to witness the Duke’s bloody death. Next to him, Laury screamed shrilly. But wait—what was she screaming?

“He’s stabbing again...!”

And then John Marshall could not believe his eyes. Duke Rodrigo de Berceo, born in 1652 in Mexico, was proving in battle with a frog that he was the best swordsman of the 17th Century!

The giant body of the snake-monstrosity twisted about—it bellowed something—and pulled up the first third of its body. Its first 8 or 10 legs buckled and it fell on its side, never to move again.

“Is he crazy?” Marshall had gasped as he watched how Duke Rodrigo de Berceo had neared the creature, then leaped backwards to avoid the frog’s snapping mouth. And that had been the last voluntary movement the vanquished serpent-monster ever made.

John Marshall looked at Laury Marten, observing her happy expression. “If the Duke,” he said, “can adapt to our technology with the same speed, enthusiasm and courage he takes to sword fighting, Laury, then we might still have a chance of getting out of this alive. But...” He looked more closely at Laury Marten. “Why have you been constantly digging through your inner pocket?” he demanded

angrily. The 3 days of running, thirst torturing them at every step, continual battles with the frogs—all this had taken its toll of any good humour in the little party.

“What’s in my pocket, Marshall? This here!” With that she pulled out the capsule of life-prolonging serum.

John Marshall stared first at the glass cylinder, then at the girl mutant. By this time Rodrigo had rejoined them and then Marshall burst out: “And you’re only now telling me this? My God, Laury! With this we’ve reached half our goal already! How could you have forgotten to tell me?”

She replaced the capsule carefully and said: “But I did tell you that I had found the location of the room where the Aras kept some of the serum...”

“...But only now do you tell me that you’ve *got* it, Laury! There’s a difference!”

Here Rodrigo felt himself forced into the role of Laury’s protector. He solemnly declared that, “When we’re back in Mexico, Laury will lead a respectable life at the castle of my ancestors. She will be honoured by all the court ladies and pages, admired by...”

“Poor fellow...” interrupted John Marshall, shaking his head. “We have to go on. If we haven’t found any water by this evening, we’ve had it!”

* * * *

Evening had passed. Night had fallen. Of water... not a trace.

The desolate mountains radiated back the day’s heat. The air was hot and dry. The wind was no relief for it was just as hot and dry, blowing with it streams of dust.

3 people staggered through a gully, worked their slow, difficult way up a hill and stumbled down the other side. They fell, picked themselves up and began to see hallucinations. They screamed inarticulately.

Tolimón was on the offensive! Its wild and bleak desert was crueler and more ruthless than all the frogs and Aras.

Laury was the first to stop and sink to the ground. Then Rodrigo collapsed. When Marshall turned to find out why no one was following him any longer, his strength vanished as well.

Thirst drove them mad and parched their lips and inflamed their eyes.

In stumbling back, Marshall discovered the cave. Desperate hope flamed up within him. The thought ‘cave’ somehow seemed connected with the thought ‘water’.

And they *did* find water!

A puddle reflected back the shine of their lamps! A puddle the depth of a man’s foot and 3 paces wide!

“Water!” gurgled Rodrigo, falling to his knees to take a drink.

Then the ray-pistol hissed and blasted the stinking liquid into steam. Marshall had caught wind of the water's vile smell at the last second and acted instinctively.

With an insane cry of anger, the disappointed Duke hurled himself at the telepath. John Marshall's fist was still stronger than the weakened Grandee, however, and Rodrigo fell wordlessly to the ground. John saw Laury's desperate look, then heard her dry and unrestrained sobbing.

Would their end come here in the cave—whose temperature was low enough that it seemed to give them a little more strength, perhaps enough to think a little more clearly?

Hypercom... whispered something distantly in Marshall's brain. Somewhat later it whispered again: *Hypercom...*

But the destruction of his small spacecraft had taken the on board hypercom with it. It was only thanks to his foresight that he had left the ship with a number of handguns. Had he left those behind, the frogs would have had better luck with their hunting.

"I've got it!" John Marshall suddenly exclaimed. His voice echoed in the cave. "Don't ask me anything... don't ask..." he whispered to the other two before they could bombard him with questions. "Concentrate... concentrate..."

He was half-mad with thirst but he had to broadcast the strongest telepathic message possible. Even under normal circumstances, it was a difficult feat, requiring as it did far more energy than usual mental processes.

Rohun had to help! Rohun had to come! Rohun had to fulfil his promise now!

Concentration!—but no results.

Marshall could call on Springer captain Rohun—and over hypercom!

And now a glass of water, John Marshall, he thought. The torturing thirst was draining him of all his strength. Something to drink, drink—just one cool little swallow!

He slapped his own face, trying to drive away the energy-sapping thirst. Concentrate! Concentrate!

He did not give up. Perry Rhodan had never given up, either! He could not fail Perry Rhodan. Perry Rhodan had never deserted any of his men when they ran into trouble.

Now... but it was all gone. Try again! And again!

Yes...

And the telepathic impulse had been sent! But was it strong enough to activate the auxiliary hypercom built into the ceiling of his slum quarters?

Probe... probe on to Trulan and convince himself that he had not fallen victim to a hallucination.

The hypercom was working! He was positive of it!

A new burst of telepathic energy to the auxiliary hypercom—tune it to Rohun's frequency!

Suddenly John Marshall felt strong. He had conquered the thirst madness.

Then he heard the Springer captain's voice!

Yes, and now—now the hypercom converted telepathic impulses into words and even switched on the coder and distorter mechanism. No Ara could listen in on the conversation now.

“I'm coming, Ixt!” were Rohun's final words.

And then they waited.

* * * *

Rohun stormed “Skartash phikrac!” He reviled Otznam and Tulin with the most drastic obscenities in the Springer lexicon. “Bishdawk gratskel plog!” John Marshall, Laury Marten and Rodrigo listened silently to the tirade and neither Otznam nor Tulin had anything to say either.

“...What in the name of all the star-devils got into you two, bringing these 3 people on board my ship? Pack them up in the shuttle-boat and take them back down to Tolimon! Which one of you fools came up with the idea, anyway...? I'm talking too much! Take them back to Tolimon, land them anywhere they want to go but don't take any risk doing it! I don't want to be turned into a gas cloud along with all the ships in my clan! Now get going!”

Marshall was already at the door when Rohun called after him The Galactic Trader was struggling against his inner feelings. “Ixt,” he said, depressed, “I'm keeping to my word. Otznam and Tulin...”

“Very well,” Marshall interrupted. “When your agents take us safely back to Tolimon, we'll still be the best of friends, Rohun!”

He meant it sincerely for he knew well how much the Galactic Trader had risked rescuing the 3 Terrans. To ask more of Rohun would not only be impolite but it would also mean for Rohun and his entire clan the danger of being ruthlessly annihilated by the Aras.

Shortly thereafter 5 persons left for the Ara world Tolimon in Rohun's small shuttlecraft.

* * * *

Trulan, Tolimon's capital city, lay on the planet's dayside. Otznam did not dare fly there.

“All frequencies are jammed with radar impulses,” he said despondently, indicating the overworked communications equipment on board the shuttle. Marshall, sitting in the copilot's seat, also saw no possibility of landing unnoticed. Something happening down below must have sounded the alarm on the Ara world all over again. He did not suspect that he was the cause of the new alarm.

Tulin looked at Marshall again from one side. Marshall noticed and decided to

glance inside the Springer agent's mind.

Tulin had been by chance with Capt. Rohun when Marshall's call for help came in. Neither he nor the space captain could have recognized the voice as Marshall's; only the code word had assured them that the message was not a trap.

"What's wrong?" the telepath asked the red-haired agent.

"I keep wondering where the hypercom you used to call us for help is! You didn't have one in the cave when we landed; and not only that, your message sounded to us like a computer was reading it out loud. Whatever it was Rohun and I heard, it wasn't anything human!"

"Here is my hypercom," John Marshall lied coolly, showing him his watch. "This right here is the loudspeaker and here, this tiny bump—inside that's the microphone! A hypercom doesn't always have to be an enormous apparatus, does it?" Marshall knew that he was bluffing outrageously but no other alternative was left to him.

The eyes, of both Springers widened. "The hypercom is in that little thing?" demanded Otnam, not believing a word of it. Just as Marshall was reading Otnam's thoughts to find out what the Springer was going to say next, an Ara ship suddenly appeared in space and made its course towards them. "Oh no!" exclaimed the Springer angrily. "No more halfway measures now—it's all or nothing!"

Before Marshall could intervene, Otnam had wrenched the tiny spacecraft's nose downwards and was bulleting it at an insane velocity towards the surface of Tolimon.

Marshall suddenly understood what the agent had in mind.

Otnam was flying towards the Ara police landing field. There air traffic was heaviest and an enormous amount of activity was always in progress. The sheer bulk of traffic was their sole chance—they could escape detection in the confusion of incoming and outgoing air and spacecraft.

The thickening atmosphere around the small shuttlecraft began to howl as Otnam continued his headlong flight. The Ara ship following them had not expected such a manoeuvre and changed its course much too late. The Springer agent had won valuable seconds.

"Get ready to jump!" John Marshall alerted Laury Marten and Rodrigo. Like the others, the man from the 17th Century was wearing a spacesuit of the best Arkonide construction. Laury Marten tried again and again to explain to him what a deflector field was—how a person could fly with this suit—what gravity was and what its neutralization meant—but he did not understand.

"Many thanks, Springers!" Marshall called to Tulin and Otnam as he entered the small hatch last and closed it behind him.

Marshall, Laury and Rodrigo left the shuttlecraft at an altitude of 30 miles. Duke Rodrigo hung in the middle, believing devils and ghosts were responsible for it all, while above them Springer agent Otnam brought his ship around and rocketed back towards open space.

The 3 Terrans dropped straight down. Marshall, like Laury Marten, knew that they would be picked up on the radarscopes in the ground station below. The quicker they reached the ground, the better their chances of success would be.

Rodrigo dangled on a plastic cable between the other two, quite convinced that he had died and was falling into the pits of hell. He no longer had any conception of the passage of time and then, when he cried out in terror because invisible pressures seemed to be trying to squeeze him to death, Marshall let out a sigh of relief. They had reached the ground.

They touched down just over half a mile from the edge of the police landing field and next to a roadway.

“Get these suits off!” Marshall ordered. “We’ll stick out like sore thumbs if we keep them on!”

The expensive Arkon suits were hidden behind the handiest bushes. Marshall peered through the night at the lighted landing field. More insistent than ever came the thought of making a jump from there to Trulan. Laury, who knew what he was thinking, grew increasingly enthusiastic about the plan. Out loud she said: “It’ll be daylight in 3 hours.”

“We’ll have been in Trulan long before then,” Marshall replied, almost threateningly.

Even so, an hour later still found them at the Ara police spaceport for despite their intensive search they had not yet been able to find a suitable aircraft.

Then, coming out of the night, a small courier airboat landed with 2 men aboard. An Ara left the airboat while the pilot remained dozing in his sleep.

John Marshall and Laury Marten divided their prey between them. She took the Ara, who had been picked up by a car and was being driven to the administration building, and Marshall worked on the pilot with his psycho-beamer. When 3 people came aboard and had him fly to Trulan, the influence of the beamer would prevent the pilot from asking any questions or even wondering.

The thoughts Laury found in the Ara officer’s mind left her speechless. The commotion on Tolimon was due to John Marshall! He was the one the Aras were so feverishly searching for! They had put all the evidence together that proved he could not be Ixt the Galactic Trader despite his claims.

“Get ready!” said Marshall, getting up. “Tell the Duke he’s not to say a single word, no matter what happens! Laury, I’m holding you responsible for the man!”

Again they put Rodrigo in the middle while Laury whispered to him without any interruption.

Once they met 2 Aras, passing them at a distance of 3 paces; 2 short applications of the psycho-beamer took care of the galactic physicians. Then the courier ship came into view in front of them. The hatch was open and the small entrance ramp had been extended. The pilot didn’t even turn around as John Marshall stood at the inner hatch, allowing Rodrigo and Laury to enter first.

“Ready?” asked the Ara in the pilot’s seat.

The hatch doors closed with a hiss.

“Ready!” answered John Marshall calmly despite his inner turmoil.

Would a ship taking off without reporting to headquarters be noticed on the landing field radar? They hurtled into the night.

Dawn was breaking as they approached Trulan. Here they were spotted by the traffic control, which radioed its demand for identification. The pilot gave the number of his craft and the Ara of Traffic Control became unusually friendly. “We’ll hold space open for you and send a car to pick you up!”

Marshall and Laury Marten glanced at each other. Now they were playing their daring game to the utmost!

Why should they go on foot when the Aras would drive them? And where would they be safer than in an official car of the Ara police or Secret Service?

The pilot, who had been hypnotically influenced only to ask himself no questions about the purpose of his flight or passengers, and who had been instructed to return to the police landing field immediately after landing in Trulan, landed the courier airboat gently in space 11.

The car was already waiting.

Not wasting a second, the 2 mutants brought the driver and the Secret Service officer accompanying him under the power of their suggestion.

Again John Marshall climbed out last and again the impulse-beamer in his pocket was ready to fire.

Again nothing untoward happened.

“Where to?” asked the driver, turning towards them. The Ara from the Secret Service stared straight ahead and took no notice of them.

“Street of the Great Mob,” said Marshall.

Then something happened which he had not figured on: the Ara Secret Service headquarters called their car over the radio.

Neither the driver nor the officer reacted.

Again came the call from headquarters. Marshall then decided to elevate his audacity to unbelievable impudence. Motivated by an irresistible order from Marshall’s psychobeamer, the driver spoke into his microphone: “Vehicle KK-107 in special action! Purpose top secret because of danger of being overheard! Will report again in half an hour! Over and out!”

“Turn the sender off!” Marshall ordered the driver.

He turned it off.

The police vehicle raced towards the Street of the Great Moh with the certainty of a homing pigeon. John Marshall took no notice of the traffic jams on the expressway. Instead he tried to pick up Futgris’ thoughts and learn what had happened in his shop during his absence.

But Futgris was no longer in the animal shop!

Not one of the salesclerks was still there!

But there were Aras—9 men from the Secret Service were even just about to

have his office undergo a thorough examination.

But that will mean they'll find the new make telecom! were Marshall's first thoughts.

"Where do you want me to stop?" the driver of the defence car interrupted Marshall's thoughts.

"Not here! I've changed my mind. Make it the column of the Great Moh."

The driver expressed no surprise at the change. The officer at his side kept staring straight ahead. Both men were kept under constant hypnotic control by Laury Marten's psycho-ray beamer.

John Marshall neither saw nor heard anything any more. He was concentrating, thinking of his office and the small incendiary bomb inside sitting on his writing desk. Beneath its camouflaging wrapping it was no larger than a hazelnut.

Ignition! The telepath was issuing a command.

There it was again, behind his forehead, that sensation as if a circuit had been closed.

Marshall breathed heavily as he leaned back. He felt sure of the success of this affair. Very soon there would be a fire alarm in the Street of the Great Moh and the pet shop run by Ixt would burn down. He was not concerned that for days the Aras would unsuccessfully be trying to find an explanation of why the so harmless appearing fire could not be put out by any means at their disposal...

Once again the Ara defence central came in on the receiver: "Car KK 107, respond at once and..."

Suddenly John Marshall's 6th sense warned him of impending danger. "Stop here!" he instructed the driver.

The car had not come to a complete halt when he jumped out, dragging Laury Marten and Rodrigo with him. He saw 2 other service vehicles stop on the other side of the street.

When, 4 hours later, the Arkon-steel door was locked and Rodrigo looked disapprovingly around Marshall's slum hideaway, Laury Marten smiled for the first time. But John Marshall knew that the Aras had not yet given up their pursuit of the Terrans.

They had left an all too obvious clue behind.

The clue was named Rodrigo de Berceo—with hip-high top boots, sleeveless jersey, lace trim and a broad-rimmed, plumed hat!

Rodrigo would lead the Aras straight to even this slum hideout!

"Wonderful prospect!" muttered Marshall, half in thought. He looked at Laury and shook his head pessimistically.

She did not return his look. Dejectedly, Laury sat down on the edge of the bed and sank her head in her arms.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan listened to the message coming in to Hellgate over the steel-dome hypercom. A new report from John Marshall was in progress and this time it was a long one.

The longer Perry listened, the longer his face became. Only once did a flicker of satisfaction cross his features: when Marshall spoke of the life-serum capsule.

“And the Springers?” Rhodan asked sharply.

Marshall had not been able to make contact with them.

They had all vanished.

This affair was too dangerous even for them!

This information Rhodan digested instantly and his response was the music of the spheres to Marshall’s ears. Even Laury Marten’s blue funk changed from mood indigo to great white hope when she heard the 2 words Perry uttered:

“I’m coming!”

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

ONE DANGEROUS MISSION has been accomplished by Terranian undercover agents John Marshall & Laury Marten of the Mutant Corps: they have secured a small sample of the Aras' guarded serum which prolongs life.

But what good is the miracle substance if the mutants can't remove it from the planet Tolimon?

Enter: Inspector Tristol from Arkon. And a personal servant who's the expectorating image of a world-known mouse-beaver with telekinetic and other extrasensory powers.

But the fickle finger of Fate throws a great big 8-ball into the equation when the Real Inspector from Arkon meets up with—

THE PSEUDO ONE

by

Clark Darlton